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"BY THIS RED STAIN I SWEAR TO AVENGE MY FATHER'S DEATH."

CHAPTER I.

"BY THIS RED STAIN I SWEAR!"

"WELL, who's there?"

"Oh, open up! D'ye want ter keep us out here all night in the rain?"

"Not even a dog, much less a human being, should be refused shelter on such a night as this—come in."

The rude door of the ruder hut was flung wide open, the wind catching it as it swung ajar, and clanging it with a tremendous bang against the log wall, when, as if in echo to the crash, a pistol-shot rung out on the howling gale of the night, and the occupant of the cabin, staggering back with a tremendous cry of pain, fell to the floor and lay motionless.

He had been shot fair between the eyes, and was dead before he struck the planks that covered the ground inside the hut.

Stepping inside, and becoming in an instant plainly visible by the light of the smoking kerosene lamp that stood on a shelf opposite the door, the man who had fired the fatal shot strode across the room to a door that opened through a partition into an adjoining apartment, tried the latch and with an oath that

made the rafters ring, turned to his three companions who had entered after him, and growled.

"The girl's in there, boys, but has fastened the door. Hercules, bust it open!"

The man who was thus addressed, and who owed his cognomen to his immense stature and tremendous strength, placed the rifle he carried in one corner, and, stalking across the narrow room, placed his brawny shoulder against the closely-ceiled planks, threw his weight against them, and the door splintered into a thousand fragments.

"Hercules," the giant and bully of the mines, deserves more than a passing notice, as he is to figure somewhat extensively in this drama of the mountains, and a pen portrait of him will not be out of place.

Standing six feet two in his bare feet—for he disdained socks—he was broad in proportion, and possessed a magnificent physical development.

His strength was such that to fell a bullock at a blow was but child's play for him, and in all the length and breadth of the Rockies there could not be found a miner who dared cross him when angered or thwart him when in liquor.

His coarse and unkempt hair and beard added to the savageness of his appearance, while the blank hollow where his left eye should have been heightened the fierceness of his decidedly forbidding countenance.

It had been gouged out in one of his numerous rough-and-tumble bar-room encounters.

As the door crashed in, the leader, who had in the mean time taken the lamp from the shelf on which it stood, dashed into the room thus rudely carried by assault and glanced hastily about him.

A dainty chamber it was, and seemed decidedly out of place among these rude surroundings, and presented a strong contrast to the rough, uncouth trio that clustered about the door and vented their disappointment in growls and muttered expletives; for the room was untenanted and the snowy couch, that stood in one corner, bore no impress that would bear witness to a late occupant.

"A thousand curses on the luck!" hurtled the leader, as he scanned and scrutinized every crack and crevice of the room, even to those that could scarce shelter a mouse, "the girl is not here, and our expedition is partially unsuccessful!"

"Baffled by her absence our task is but half completed; for while she lives we are in constant danger."

"But, Cap," interposed Hercules, "she must come back soon—s'posin' I wait hyar an' catch her when she comes. I'll bet ef I ever git her throat in them fingers I'll shet off her wind quick enough."

"Hercules, it isn't often you talk, but when you do speak your words are diamonds."

"You wait here and 'fix' Miss Dainty and we'll go on about our work."

"You know where to find us."

"Sart'in, Cap. She can't be long a-comin' fur I reckon she's only gone down to ther gulch ter git some med'cine fur the ole man."

"Small need of a doctor he has now!"

And at the brutal jest the others laughed loudly as they returned to the other room, more than one of them spurning with his foot the dead body lying there so still and quiet, with a slowly flowing stream of dark fluid gliding over the floor from the wound in the forehead and rapidly becoming thick and clotted.

A noble form it was that was thus stretched out in death, with the damp dew shining on the forehead, while the white hair that clustered so thickly about the massive brow, and the snowy beard that swept the broad chest were clotted and matted with the life-fluid that be-smearred them all.

Paying not as much attention to the corpse as they would to the dead body of a favorite dog, the man whom the others addressed as captain, and two of his followers left the cabin, with a parting word to Hercules, and mounting their horses that were fastened to a rack in front of the door, galloped off into the darkness, the hoofs of their mustangs splashing through the mud and sending it flying in every direction.

Hercules, thus left to himself, began his preparations in anticipation of the arrival of the girl who seemed destined to become the second prey of the night to this ravening band of assassins.

Taking roughly hold of the heels of the dead man, he dragged the body across the room and flung it heavily into the adjoining apartment, the course being marked by a sinuous trail of

blood, for the dark stream still welled from the yawning wound in the forehead, and then spread a buffalo-robe, which he took from a pile of skins in the corner, over the red pool in the middle of the floor.

Then closing the outer door, and fastening it, he turned the light low, and throwing himself upon the fur couch in the corner, waited.

The minutes sped on and he had just begun to nod into a slight doze when the clatter of a horse's hoofs outside roused him in an instant, and in a second's time he was standing by the door and on the alert.

A moment more and there came a gentle tap on the door, and a fresh young voice called out:

"Open, father, it is I, Dainty."

And stepping forward, Hercules drew the bolt and gave admission to the applicant.

A slight, girlish figure emerged from the outer gloom, stepped into the room and cried:

"Why, father, all in the dark! why don't—"

A rude grasp on the delicate throat, a fierce clutch about the slender neck, and the succeeding words were lost in a gasp and a gurgle that showed how deadly was the encircling band that thus strangled her.

But it was not the intention of the giant to choke her into instant insensibility, for he preferred to toy with her for a time as does the cat with the mouse, so he relaxed his cruel grip and suffered the girl to escape for an instant, planting himself in the doorway, and thrusting her from him with such force that, her foot catching in the robe he had spread, it was dragged away and she fell heavily to the floor.

A wild shriek sprung from her lips, and leaping to her feet, she turned the lamp to its fullest blaze, and turning, confronted her assailant.

For a moment they stood thus, her eye catching the crimson pool in the middle of the floor and dilating with horror, when suddenly, as she cried out again, the giant sprung toward her.

But on the instant, a lithe body flashed through the open door and a small gloved hand shooting out on the instant, a stunning blow caught Hercules behind the left ear, and he went to earth as if shot.

As composedly as if in a ball-room the savior of the young girl walked to the light, and with an expression of decided disgust on his almost feminine features, examined his right hand, on which the lavender glove he wore was split from wrist to fingers with the force of the blow.

"Another pair of gloves ruined. Kit, my boy, you should remove your kids before you give way to your impetuosity!"

And tearing the glove from his hand he tossed it from him, when it fell in the pool that marked the spot where the dead man had fallen.

The girl, who had stood a silent witness of the encounter, now turned and caught sight of the dead body of her father through the open doorway, and rushing to it, threw herself prone on the corpse, with a thousand inarticulate moans and kisses.

But suddenly she started to her feet as if stung by an electric shock, re-entered the main room, and, falling on her knees by the crimson spot, picked up the lavender glove that lay therein, stained and red, and lifting it high in the air cried:

"By this red stain I swear to avenge my father's death and track his murderers to their graves!"

While the young rescuer, lifting his hat reverently from his head, added a solemn:

"Amen!"

CHAPTER II.

A CHALLENGE.

REVERENTLY with bared head, the young man stood thus for a moment, and then, as the prostrate giant in the corner began to give some signs of life, he walked over to where he was lying, and, stooping, removed the pistol and murderous-looking knife from Hercules's belt.

Returning to the girl, who yet remained kneeling where she had thrown herself, he took her by the hand and gently lifted her to her feet and spoke a few words of kindness and comfort.

And the girl, turning her lovely blue eyes full upon him, seemed for the first time to fully realize how near she had been to death, and placing her hand on her throat, which was scratched and scored and torn by the cruel clutch of her would-be assassin opened her

lips as if to speak, but before she could utter a word, burst out in a wild torrent of tears and cried like a child.

It was a blessed relief, and her companion realized that it was better that nature should take her course, so did not endeavor to quiet her but stood silently awaiting the lulling of the storm.

And the very violence of the fit of weeping soon brought quiet, and gradually the sobs that shook the slender frame ceased, and the fair girl became quiet by degrees and was able to turn to and thank her rescuer.

And a lovely picture they presented as they stood there together—she with her masses of golden hair, loosened in the struggle and streaming far below her waist, her delicate complexion, her clear-cut features and her magnificent blue eyes; he, the living embodiment of his companion.

So much alike were they in feature, hair and eyes, so startling was the resemblance, that an observer would have taken oath that they were not only brother and sister, but twins.

"Dress them both in like costumes," would have said the on-looker, "and it would be impossible to distinguish them apart."

But now they were dressed anything but alike.

She wore a close-fitting habit of dark-green cloth, which showed her slender form to the best advantage, while a broad-brimmed hat, in which drooped a magnificent white ostrich feather, was planted firmly on the back of her shapely head.

Small boots incased her shapely feet, to the heels of which were attached silver spurs with tiny jingling bells, which tinkled musically as she walked, and snugly-fitting gauntlet gloves covered her hands.

The young fellow who had so opportunely arrived in her dire distress was, as he stood there, a picture for a Rembrandt.

Twenty-two years had with them brought no sign of beard, and his complexion was as smooth and fair as a woman's.

His hair, virgin to the scissors' touch, hung far below his shoulders, and was of the hue of burnished gold, with streaks of light sparkling in it here and there, as the rays of the lamp glinted among the flowing strands.

It was identical in color and shade with that of the girl, while his eyes were as like hers as one pea to another.

But with his face and head the resemblance ceased, for he was clad in a costume which was so striking that it would have attracted attention anywhere.

His coat—a loose-fitting sack, with silver buttons as large as trade dollars—was made of the finest Lyons velvet, of a deep claret color, the vest, which was cut low, being of the same material.

Tightly-fitting trousers, also of velvet but Prussian blue in color, clothed his lower limbs, and boots of the shiniest of patent leather, but now flecked here and there with patches of mud, came to his knees, while gold spurs, small and neat, with balls attached, ornamented his heels.

His hat was broad, and black as night, the material being also velvet, it being encircled with a gold band an inch and a half in breadth, fastened on the left side with an enormous golden buckle, in which sparkled a diamond of unusual size and purity.

A crimson scarf, knotted negligently, hung from beneath his turn-down collar, and in the bosom of his shirt shone a stud that capped the diamond in his hat.

His left hand was gloved with a kid covering of the most delicate lavender hue, he having split the glove on his right hand when he struck the bully, who yet lay half-unconscious in the corner.

A small case of Russian leather hung at his left side, being suspended from his right shoulder by a massive gold chain, while about his waist was buckled a broad belt that carried in it two handsome and deadly six-shooters and a keen, ivory-handled knife.

He was slight, although tall, not weighing more than a hundred and thirty-five pounds, yet beneath the velvety covering of his coat and skin lurked muscles and sinews of steel, while the lightning's flash is not quicker than were his motions when in action.

But while these two stood thus, Hercules had almost fully recovered his senses, and softly stealing one hand along the floor he grasped a small billet of wood, and unperceived, drawing back his arm, he flung it at the lamp on the shelf, striking it fair, overturning it, and leaving the room in total darkness.

At the crash the youth sprung to the door, to bar the exit.

For an instant all was still, each one of the actors in the drama holding their breath and waiting.

Then the voice of the stranger broke the silence.

"Young lady, if you will strike a match, I will attend to our friend.

"Do not fear to move boldly.

"Should he move, I will shoot him as I would a mad cur."

Clear and firm came the answering voice:

"There is not a match in the house.

"One of my errands to the gulch was to procure some, but I must have dropped them on the road."

"Then come this way and stand near me; when there are wolves about we must have a care lest we get bitten."

And as the girl stole to his side and nestled her hand confidently in his, the gruff voice of the bully broke out on the stillness of the room, for the storm had subsided and no sound broke the silence of the night from outside:

"Ye'r' a brave youngster, you be.

"Ye've taken away my weepins, an' now ye think ye've got me.

"Give me half a show an'—"

"Shut up and listen:

"I now unloose my belt and fling it to the floor."

And suiting the action to the word, he unclasped the belt and allowed it to fall to his feet.

"Now, we are equal, and will see if you will win."

"Oh! pray be careful!" pleaded the voice of the young girl, as she clung to the young man's hand.

"You do not know this man.

"You do not know the reputation he bears in the neighborhood.

"He will surely kill you if he once gets you in his grasp.

"Let us fly; the door is open, and in the darkness we can escape."

"My dear child," mildly, but firmly, interposed the young fellow, "do not worry. I am well able to take care of myself and of you.

"I will teach this gentleman something that I believe will be of service to him.

"Stand to one side, and fear nothing.

"Now, sir, I am ready to argue this question with you."

"All right, my young sprig, I'll take your measure for a coffin!"

CHAPTER III.

AN ESCAPE AND A CAPTURE.

THESE words were sufficient for the delicate-looking young fellow, who, thus guided by the voice, leaped lightly forward, straightening his left arm as he did so, his small clinched, gloved fist coming in crashing contact with the lips of the giant, and driving him back, with crushing force, the back of his head striking the log wall of the room and causing a thousand stars to dance before his eyes.

For an instant he stood, leaning against the wall in a semi dazed condition, and then, with a roar like a wounded lion, he rushed blindly forward, with outstretched arms, and encountering his adversary, clasped him as in a vise, and fairly crushed the breath out of his lungs as he squeezed the slim young fellow against his brawny chest.

For a few moments his position was a desperate one, and it seemed as if he were doomed to die, particularly as the giant began to rain blows on his head with his free hand, until the lad's brain was one whirl of dazed confusion.

But he was quick as a flash, supple as a snake and slippery as an eel, and suddenly crooking his leg behind Hercules's knee, he glided from his grasp and, with an unexpected strength, gave him such a push that he was tripped up and fell with a tremendous thud to the floor.

And then there was a sudden crackling, a fizz, and a sputter, in the corner of the room, where the young girl had found a match and lighted it, and before the bully regained his feet the lamp was burning clear and bright, and the two combatants were plainly visible to each other.

Springing hastily to his feet, Hercules, who presented a terrible appearance, his lip having been split from the last blow he had received and gushing blood, shook himself and again rushed on his young adversary, his sledge-hammer fist raised high in the air to crush the life out of the youth with one blow.

Cool and calm and smiling the other awaited him, and as the giant swung his fist in a swinging, round-arm blow, he dodged down almost to

the floor, the stroke passing harmlessly over his head, and then, rising, planted that dainty little fist just under the giant's jaw, with such force and precision that Hercules was lifted clear off his feet, his jaw-bone was cracked and dislocated, and he fell all in a heap, howling with pain and rage.

Paying not the slightest attention to him, the young fellow walked over to where the girl was standing with clasped hands, trembling with fear, courteously doffed his hat and addressed her.

"It is not fitting that you should be the witness of such scenes.

"The rain has ceased, the skies are clear and it would be better if you sought shelter with friends; for such you surely have in the neighborhood?"

At the interrogation the girl sighed sadly while a mournful smile stole about the corners of her mouth.

"You are evidently a stranger here," she said, "and not familiar with the dwellers in this vicinity.

"There is no one to whom I could apply for shelter within miles and miles, for none but miners occupy the cabins hereabouts."

"But you can not remain here."

"Here I remain until the last sad rites are performed and my father—" here her voice faltered for a moment, but was instantly steadied—"and my father is laid to rest.

"Can I count on you to aid me in performing this office?"

"You can rely upon me to undertake whatever you may ask."

With a graceful bend of her proud head in acknowledgment, the girl left him and walked into the other room, where she stood by the body of her dead father, looking down into the cold still face, but uttering never a word—shedding never a tear.

Her friend and ally followed her, and, removing his hat, stood silently awaiting whatever she might wish to suggest.

And so they remained until the pent-up emotions of the girl again broke forth in a storm of sobs, and he, respecting her sorrow, quietly retired, going into the other room, and mechanically glancing at the spot where Hercules had fallen.

But the room was vacant—Hercules had disappeared.

Evidently having profited by their abstraction the giant had crawled to the door unperceived and escaped into the outer darkness.

As the young fellow sprung to the open doorway, a clatter and splashing of hoofs sounded outside, and under the dim light of the stars a horseman was indistinctly visible, dashing down the road at a break-neck pace.

Without hesitating an instant the youth leaped outside, uttered a shrill whistle, and as his horse came cantering up, neighing with delight at the sight of his master, he bounded into the saddle and calling out:

"Wait until I return!" dashed off in pursuit of the fleeing Hercules, who already had a considerable start.

Down the rocky road he sped, touching his horse gently with his spur and encouraging him to his greatest efforts with hand and voice, while the noble brute, as if realizing how important the errand was, spurred the road beneath his hoofs, and devoured the miles as if by magic.

But Hercules was also well mounted, and although he did not gain an inch, neither did his pursuer, the latter being guided in his chase only by the sound made by the foremost horse, as he galloped wildly on, for the intricate turns and twists of the mountain road hid him always from sight.

At one moment the pursuer caught a fleeting glimpse of the fleeing horseman, and his hand sought his belt to draw revolver and halt the fugitive, but with a sudden shock he realized that his weapons were lying on the floor of the cabin, where he had cast them prior to his late encounter.

For a second he hesitated and almost drew rein; but the innate recklessness and courage of the man prevailed, and loosening his grasp he again urged his steed forward.

And so he galloped madly on for a quarter of an hour more, listening all the time intently to the sound of the flying horse's feet in front of him; but as the ride began to grow wearisome in its monotony, he allowed his thoughts to stray back to the fair girl whom he had so lately left.

Lost in a bright reverie he galloped mechanically on when suddenly he aroused himself as he realized that the hoof-beats he had been fol-

lowing no longer sounded on the rocky road in front of him.

He drew rein quickly, but too late, for the forelegs of his horse encountered a lariat tightly drawn across the road and stretched at a distance of a foot or so above the ground the steed stumbled and fell on his knees, and flung his rider far into the air, whence he fell with an awful thud on his right shoulder and lay in the middle of the road, insensible.

At the same moment three brawny forms leaped from the shadow of the rock at the roadside, and six muscular hands seized and bound him fast, as Hercules, standing by, surveyed the proceedings with a grin of malignant delight.

CHAPTER IV.

A SECOND VICTIM.

LEFT alone in the cabin with the body of her beloved father, the hours rolled on unheeded by Dainty, who was lost in an agony of grief and despair.

The sudden and brutal murder of her father, now that the excitement of the past hour or so had subsided, overwhelmed her and rendered her oblivious to all surroundings.

Buried as she was in her sorrowful thoughts, she was unaware of the escape of Hercules, of the departure of his adversary, and had scarcely heard the words shouted back by the latter as he galloped away.

But finally the earliest streaks of dawn glimmered through the open door, and roused her from her thoughts, and rising, she walked into the other room, the perfect ghost of the blooming, cheery girl who had ridden up to the door the evening previous.

Expecting to find the room tenanted, she glanced around, and could at first scarcely comprehend that she was alone, and then, thinking that the stranger might have stepped outside, she went to the door and looked about.

All was deserted and silent, no living thing being in sight but her horse, which still stood fastened to the rack where she had left him the night before.

She soon had him stabled and fed and then, returning to the house, for the first time fully realized that she was alone.

The belt, with pistols and knife, lying on the floor where it had been flung, recalled vividly the encounters of a few hours before and like the memory of a dream came to her the recollection of the clatter of boots she had heard as pursued and pursuer dashed away, and the memory of the words, called out in that clear young voice:

"Wait until I return!"

And then she comprehended that Hercules must have escaped and that her young champion had started off in pursuit of him.

So returning to the side of her father, whose head she had tenderly raised and placed on a folded blanket, she recommenced her lonely vigil, and sat there quietly, until exhausted nature asserting herself, she gradually drooped, until finally she fell into a deep slumber and became oblivious to all surroundings.

The day grew clearer and brighter, the sun rising high in the heavens shone through the open doorway, and still she slept on, until finally a stealthy footstep approached the open door and a dark shadow fell across the threshold.

A head was thrust into the room followed by a body, when the intruder might have been recognized as the leader of the band which had attacked the cabin the night before.

Quietly and cautiously entering, he stole across the room to where a small cupboard was built into the corner, and finding the key in the lock, he quietly opened the door, took a small, oblong tin box from one of the shelves, and thrusting it in the bosom of his shirt, turned his attention to the adjoining room.

With a smile of fiendish delight he realized how completely the girl was at his mercy, and tip-toeing to the door he leaped upon and seized her before she was aware of his vicinity.

She was powerless in his grasp, and seemed instantly to realize that to cry for help would be useless, so submitted silently while he fastened her arms behind her with the raw-hide lariat he carried, and only fixed her eyes steadily upon him, as if to burn the photograph of his features into her memory.

Oblivious or careless of the fact that the leathern cord was cutting deeply into her delicate flesh, the bandit drew the bonds tight about her slender wrists and fastened them securely.

Then attaching the end of the lasso to a hook driven firmly into the wall, he disappeared in

the direction of the stable, soon returning with her horse, completely saddled and bridled.

Returning to where she still sat, pale but undaunted, he addressed her:

"Your dandy, kid-gloved friend is in my power, more completely than even you are. Does not this information make your heart leap with very joy?"

To his taunts he received no answer.

"You doubtless think him a royal champion, but in my hands he is as a wheat-straw—to be broken whenever I will it."

And still no answer came from those delicate lips, white through physical and mental suffering.

"A pleasing pair you will make as you swing together from the branch of some convenient tree; for you both die to-day."

The girl's patrician face blanched a trifle, yet she looked calmly and scornfully at her tormentor, and answered never a word.

"Curses on you!" fairly hissed the mocking demon, who scowled fiercely on her from under his bent brows.

"I'll rouse you yet."

And casting his glances moodily about, his eye caught the belt and pistols forgotten by her champion in his hurried exit in pursuit of Hercules.

"Ha!" he cried, "this accounts for the young dandy's being unarmed."

"Does it strike you, Miss Dainty Danford, that it is to you he will owe his death?"

"That it was in your behalf that he rode away after my friend Hercules?"

"That, as he gasps and strangles and struggles at the end of the tightening cord, his last thought will be that you are his murderess?"

"For God's sake!" sobbed the girl, "torture my body as you will, but spare me this mental agony!"

"Murderer of my father as I now know you to be, Craig Colton, murderer to be of that brave youth and myself, I defy you, and believe that God's justice will not long allow you to continue in your career of blood and crime."

"Again I say—I defy you!"

And magnificent in her disdain the young girl arose and drew her slight form, quivering with passion, to its full height.

He had roused her, at last, but the storm of her indignation was such that he cowered beneath it like a whipped coward, and without a word in reply, unfastened the rope and, dragging, rather than leading her outside, lifted her and fastened her securely in her saddle.

Then going to the door, he removed the key from the inside, closed the door and locked it, throwing the key into a clump of bushes by the roadside, and then mounting, and leading her horse by the bridle, he rode off slowly down the road.

He anticipated meeting no one, for it was a wild and desolate country and but few miners inhabited the neighborhood, they being at this hour all engaged with their labors, besides which fact, the road they were following was an old, abandoned one, lately supplanted by the new stage-route some miles distant.

After riding for some time along the road over which the followed and the follower had galloped so impetuously the night before, they came in sight of a little group that was evidently awaiting their arrival and expecting them.

The young fellow who had proven himself such a hero in the girl's defense was fastened by a rope tied about his ankles, to a tree, his hands being unbound, while he looked as jaunty and unconcerned as if in a drawing-room.

Hercules, with his head bound up in a cotton handkerchief, and his two companions, lolled about in listless attitudes, keeping however a sharp watch on their prisoner, whose prowess they evidently feared.

As the captor and the girl rode up, the men came forward, one of them lifting her to the ground, she shuddering at his touch and releasing herself as quickly as possible from his grasp, hurried to the young fellow who stood there so quietly, and with hands still bound behind her, cried:

"And it is I who have brought you to this! Can you ever forgive me?"

"Anything done in your service, even to the facing of death, would be to me a willing sacrifice!"

And stretching out his arms as she wavered, he caught her as she fell, fainting, and laid her gently on the turf.

CHAPTER V.

THE RIDE TO DEATH.

THE wretches who stood about only looked on and laughed, while the prisoner, walking as

far as the rope would permit, scooped up some water in the hollow of his hand and allowed a few drops to trickle therefrom on the forehead of the insensible girl.

Gently chafing her hands, she was soon restored to consciousness, and, sitting up, gazed about her in amazement, but soon came to a realization of her situation, and with a deep sigh turned her eyes on the man to whom she owed so much, with a pleading look for forgiveness in her magnificent blue eyes.

An answering look of devotion gave her courage, while he bending forward to raise her, whispered, unheard by the outlaws, who were attending to their horses:

"Do not despair; while there is life, there is always hope!"

"I cannot despair," she whispered, while a deep blush mantled her cheek, "so long as you are near me!"

What he might have answered remained unspoken, for at that moment they were interrupted by the leader of the gang who came toward them and roughly ordered them to mount and follow, stooping as he spoke and untying the rope from his prisoner's ankles, and fastening a noose he formed in it about his neck.

Then all having mounted, they rode on down the road for some distance, finally reaching a narrow path which branched off to the left, and up which, owing to the narrowness of the route, they were compelled to proceed in double file.

The man whom Dainty had addressed as Craig Colton and Hercules took the lead, the two prisoners coming next, they being followed in turn by the other two members of the band.

"What is to be our fate?" whispered the girl to her companion, as they rode slowly along.

"Hanging, I imagine, from what I gathered from their conversation. At least that is to be my fate, and—forgive me for the apparent selfishness of the remark—I hope it will be yours."

"What can you mean?"

"I mean that it is better you should die than become the wife of that hound."

And the young fellow nodded toward the leader who preceded them.

"A thousand times better," answered the girl, almost speaking aloud in her righteous indignation.

"Does he imagine for an instant that I would place my hand in one stained with my father's blood?"

"I am sure he killed him, or if he did not, one of his satellites did, and he was a party to the crime."

"Well, you are to have your choice, and if you are the brave girl I take you for, he will never call you his wife, even if the grave confronts you as the only alternative."

"And your faith in me shall be justified by my acts."

"Here! this confab has lasted long enough between you two."

"Young fellow, you fall back and ride with my partner; I'll keep ther young lady company."

And with an evil leer one of the men who had been riding behind pushed forward and interrupted the conversation.

In the mean time Colton and Hercules, who had ridden some distance ahead of the rest of the party, were also talking regarding the fate of the prisoners.

"He shall hang, of course," answered Colton, in response to some query of his companion.

"An' I'll yank ther rope," chuckled the other, every feature of his forbidding countenance distorted into an expression of exultant joy.

"And you can pull the rope, if you wish," assented his leader.

"An' ther gal?"

"The girl promises and swears to marry me, or she dangles from the same tree."

"Better string 'em both up to oncet, Cap; 't'll save a heap o' trouble."

"An' then ther mine—"

"Shut up, you fool," interrupted Colton, savagely, as he gazed fearfully around.

"Do you want to give the whole snap away?"

"Beg pardon, Cap; I clean forgot ther other two blokes didn't stand in."

"Well, try and remember something more than ten minutes at a time hereafter."

"It would make things safer if she should become my wife; there's no telling in these matters what may turn up."

"You've got all ther papers?"

"Safe and sound."

"Wal, what's ter be feared?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"I don't tumble."

"You wouldn't tumble if Pike's Peak were to fall on you."

"Now see hyar, Cap, hain't you a-ridin' a leetle rusty?"

"Not half as rusty as you deserve."

"But enough of this; we've got to hurry up if we want to escape a ducking."

For the sky was now as black as midnight, and as Colton spoke, the low growl of distant and muttering thunder betokened a coming storm, while a vivid flash of forked lightning split the somber veil from top to bottom.

Turning in his saddle, he called to the others in the rear to hasten, as the storm would soon break, and in obedience to the order the cavalcade broke into a quick trot, one of the men leaning forward, and severing the bonds which still chafed the wrists of the girl, that she might be able to sit in the saddle without difficulty.

And soon they came to a level stretch of ground, in the center of which stood a huge tree, under the spreading branches of which was a stone hut, of a single story.

This was the home of the outlaws.

CHAPTER VI.

A MIRACLE.

It was a wild and desolate place, this plateau into which they rode, and the gloom of the surroundings was heightened by the weird, yellow light that the storm-cloud shed down on all the landscape.

Towering cliffs of rugged rock sprung abruptly from the valley on all sides, their beetling fronts so abrupt and precipitous as to be entirely unscalable, while high up on the face of the loftiest of them was perched an eagle's eyrie, about which the birds were circling and screaming, as if affrighted by the approaching tempest.

The entire party were soon dismounted, and the horses being led away, were quickly stabled in a small building near the main edifice.

The young man was again bound, while the girl was allowed to seat herself on a small rock underneath the tree.

Then Hercules went into the house, and presently returned bearing a long and stout rope, both ends of which he quickly and skillfully knotted into running-nooses that would have excited the envy of a professional hangman.

This rope he coiled and then, standing under the tree, selected his branch.

Not more than a dozen feet from the ground a huge limb sprung from the main trunk, which, a couple of yards from its junction with the tree, split into two branches, forming a horizontal Y, and over these two branches he flung his rope, so that the two nooses dangled close to the ground, and a half a dozen feet apart.

He held the middle of the cord in his hand, so that by pulling on either the right or left side he could raise or lower either of the nooses at will, and his preparations being completed, seated himself on the ground and waited.

"Miss Dainty," began Craig Colton, courteously, "you hold two lives in your hand. Accede to my wishes, and your friend goes free and your life is safe. Refuse, and—"

"I say, Cap!" growled Hercules, wroth at the prospect of being cheated of the revenge for which he so ardently longed; "yer ain't a-goin' ter let ther young snip off, be yer?"

"Silence!" shouted Colton, livid with rage and fury at this insubordination. "Open those swollen lips of yours again before I give you permission, and, by the black demon I worship, I'll blow you to the lower regions to sing eternally!"

And drawing his revolver, he pointed it straight at the giant's head.

The latter, knowing with whom he had to deal, immediately subsided, and contented himself with incoherent growlings and mutterings.

Again the thunder crashed in near proximity to the spot, following close upon a vivid flash of yellow lightning.

"Your answer must be given in fifteen minutes from the time of asking the question."

"That you may not think me harsh and cruel"—laughing sardonically—"we will retire and afford you opportunity to consult with this young gentleman."

"But this only on the condition that you promise me not to endeavor to free him or to escape yourself, although the latter would be a vain effort."

"Do you promise this?"
 "I promise."
 "You will not endeavor to untie those cords or to escape?"
 "I will not."
 "Well and good."
 "I know I can depend on your word, for your truthfulness is but one of your many virtues."
 "Now, as to my question."
 "Will you, within twenty-four hours, lay your hand in mine and marry me?"
 "Stop!" lifting his hand as the girl was about to speak.

"Take your time and consider well before you answer."

"And remember, besides, that your reply does not affect you alone; this young fellow is equally interested by it with you."

"If your answer is 'Yes,' he shall be released and no harm shall ever come to him from any of us."

"Should your answer be 'No,' then he dangles from one of yonder nooses, you from the other."

"Save his life or murder him!"

"Choose!"

And rising, and followed by Hercules, who secured his rope by placing a stone on it, and by the other two members of the gang, he walked to the house, wherein they all disappeared.

Scarcely had the door closed behind them than the girl, with streaming eyes and clasped hands, turned to the young fellow who stood there, with a look of intense disdain playing over his handsome features, and, sobbing, cried:

"Oh! counsel, advise me!"

"Was ever weak womanhood put to such a test as this; in one balance of these terrible scales hangs your life; in the other a lifetime of self-loathing and misery for me."

"But what is my despair compared to your life? My mind is made up; I choose marriage, and your safety; death can always relieve my sufferings!"

And turning, she walked proudly toward the house.

"Stop!"

And as she arrested her firm step, he continued:

"My life is not for sale on the terms proposed."

"As Heaven is my judge, if I am set free, the first shot of any weapon that I can procure will be for that cur, the second for myself."

"If life is to end, as you say yours will in the event of your marriage, let us die together and dying, thwart this villain who would make whatever of life that was left to you a torture!"

"My brother—for more you can never be—you are even now more noble than I thought although I knew what your answer would be."

"And now, good-by!"

And bending over him she kissed him solemnly on the forehead, just as Colton came from the house.

"Your answer, Miss Dainty?"

"Death, rather than life with you!"

"Then so be it!" he shrieked.

"Hercules, do your work!"

A minute sufficed to place the nooses about the necks of these twain, doomed to die so young. A spike, to which to fasten the rope being driven into the tree-trunk, Hercules and two of the others caught the rope, the girl's hands were fastened behind her and at a signal from Colton they pulled, and Dainty and the brave young fellow who died for her, swung choking in the air as the fatal rope tightened about their necks.

The rope was fastened to the spike, and Colton, Hercules and the two others, stood, leaning against the tree, gloating over their victims.

But at that moment the black pall overhead was rent asunder as by magic, a deafening clap of thunder split the air, while a vivid flash of lightning descending straight down from the cloud overhead, struck the tree, shivering it to atoms and wrenching the limb, on which hung the two victims, from the trunk, and dashing them to the ground.

The bandits, standing about the tree, were hurled in every direction, while at the same instant the rain descended in torrents.

CHAPTER VII.

A CLOSE CALL.

FOR a short time it seemed as if the bolt from Heaven had descended with equal fatality on executioners and victims, for not one of them stirred and they were, to appearance, dead.

But in a short time the cooling rain and the brisk breeze that swept over the valley, revived the daring young fellow who had but a

moment before been choking to death, and the fall having loosened the noose, he was able to breathe without difficulty.

So, sitting up, he looked about him, and in an instant realized that he had been saved by a miracle, but as his eye caught the prostrate form of the young girl, lying there so still and white, his heart gave a mighty bound and staggering to his feet, he tugged and pulled at the cords which encircled his wrists.

To his great joy he found that they were so soaked with the rain that they stretched considerably and were easily slipped over his hands, when he hurried to Dainty's side and, loosening the cruel rope from her white throat, used all of his efforts to resuscitate her.

His efforts were soon rewarded, for she heaved a deep sigh, opened her eyes, and in a few moments was able to sit up, weak from the shock, but thoroughly conscious of her surroundings.

Colton and his three comrades, still lay motionless, and, standing as they had been, close to the trunk of the tree, had evidently been instantly killed by the thunderbolt.

In fact, one of them, who lay nearer to the youth and Dainty than the others, bore on his temple a small, black spot, showing where the flash had struck him.

The storm-cloud passed as quickly as it had come up, and in a few moments the girl was able to mount the horse which her companion had procured and saddled for her, and ride off with him from this terrible scene of desolation and death.

Before leaving the fatal spot, however, the youth had secured his belt, which lay on the ground near where Colton had fallen, and, buckling it about his waist, felt able to cope with scores of enemies in defense of the fair girl to whom fate had so closely linked him.

After they had left the valley and a bend in the path hid it from their gaze as they turned and looked, they gradually fell into conversation, Dainty being somewhat embarrassed at the recollection of the caress she had bestowed on her companion when she thought that they were about to die together.

But this feeling soon wore off and the recollection of her father's awful fate came surging back to her memory with renewed force.

"Now that we are once more free, I want to ask you a question which I should have put to you before, if it had not been for this succession of stirring incidents that drove everything from my mind."

"Ask anything, and if I can answer it, be assured that I will, Miss Dainty."

"You know my name?" with open-eyed surprise.

"You see that I do."

"And how did you learn it, pray?"

"Did not the man who lies dead back yonder, speak to you by name just before our—our—accident?"

"True, I had forgotten it."

"But now that you know my name, do you not think it only fair that I should learn yours?"

"Most assuredly."

"Then—pray tell me it."

"I can only give you the name by which I am known out here; I am called KID-GLOVE KIT."

"But your last name?"

"It is the saddest thing I can say to you, but—I do not know it."

"Do not know your own name?"

"I do not know my own name!"

"But—"

"Pardon me, Miss Dainty, but it is a very, very sad story, and too long to tell you now."

"At some future time, perhaps—"

"Oh! pray forgive me! I hope I have not hurt you by my persistence; that I have not wounded your feelings."

"Not the least in the world," returned Kit, heavily. "Please call me just Kit in the future, for if I have no name now, I will try and make one for myself before I die!"

"On one condition I will call you 'Kit.'"

"And that condition is?"

"That hereafter you will drop the 'miss,' and call me by my first name—'Dainty!'"

"Agreed!"

"Then there is my hand on it."

"And there is mine."

And the two hands met in a lingering clasp from which they seemed loth to withdraw.

"And now, one thing more—Dainty," his tongue hesitating an instant over the unaccustomed syllables.

"Yes?" she replied, encouragingly and blushing delightfully.

"We are no longer 'brother and sister?'"

"Oh yes we are," gayly, and then solemnly: "For you must remember my father yet lies unburied, and my first duty is to him."

"But my hat! In the hurry of departure from that awful spot I left it lying on the ground."

"We must return for it."

"Spare yourself that visit; let me go alone. I will gallop there and return and you can await me here."

"Are you familiar with fire-arms?"

"Perfectly."

"Then take this revolver, use it if necessary, but trust rather to your horse's speed should any one approach you."

"Should you not be here I will join you at your cabin."

"Farewell, and good luck!"

"Hurry back," she cried, as he galloped off at full speed, kissing her hand to him as he reached a bend in the road.

Lifting his hat in acknowledgment of the salutation, he spurred up the path, swept around the bend and disappeared.

Riding on rapidly he soon came to the valley, and rode up to the tree, from the spike in which yet dangled the fatal rope, saw the hat lying there, leaped from his horse and picked it up and then glancing about, saw that not one of the stricken men was in sight!

At the same moment a shot rung from the stone house, and a bullet, whizzing by his ear, scored his cheek and brought blood.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BLAZING HOME.

KIT had too much common horse-sense to attack a concealed enemy, barricaded behind the stone-walls of a house, so, leaping into his saddle, he bent low, stuck his spurs deep into his horse's flanks, and scampered down the valley as fast as his thoroughbred could carry him.

One or two more bullets sped after him, but without inflicting any injury, for either the marksmanship was very poor, or the nerves of the shooter were unstrung by the late shock from the lightning.

Thanks to the fleetness of his steed, he was soon out of all danger, and, turning the bend in the path, drew rein, not wishing to run the risk of injuring his horse by galloping him down the rock-strewn steepness of the road.

Proceeding leisurely along, carefully holding the ostrich-feather decked hat, he soon drew near the spot where he had left Dainty, and quickening his horse's pace somewhat, he hurried on at a quick trot, rapidly nearing the bend in the path, which, once turned, would bring him in sight of the fair girl.

But at that moment a pistol-shot rung out on the still air, and with a snort of pain his horse bounded forward, as the needle-like, golden rowels were sunk deep in his sides.

And as he swerved around the corner of the bluff, a riderless horse, with the empty stirrups of his empty saddle battering his sides and frightening him to still greater speed, came dashing up the path, and barely avoided colliding with him.

And as he came in view of Dainty, he saw that young girl bending over a human body which lay stretched on the ground, using her handkerchief to stanch the blood which flowed freely from a wound in the shoulder of the prostrate man.

Riding hastily up, he drew his horse on to the haunches with a vigorous pull on the bit, and with a voice trembling with emotion, cried:

"What does this mean?"

"Only another of Colman's band, who tried to abduct me," replied Dainty more coolly than would have been expected. "But, thanks to your revolver, I was able to defend myself."

"And he offered you injury?"

The tones of his voice fairly bubbled with wrath, as he asked the question.

"I will tell you," answered Dainty, as, having finished her surgical labors, she turned to Kit:

"Just before you returned this man came riding up the path, evidently on the way to the house we saw up under the tree in the valley, and which is the rendezvous for all of Craig Colton's band."

"When he saw me he approached, and very politely asked me if I had seen a party of four horsemen riding up the path. I replied in the negative, when he approached still closer, and before I could realize what he intended, he had grasped me by the arm, exclaiming:

"If I mistake not, you are Miss Dainty Danford, and a young lady whom Mr. Craig Colton

will be very glad to see at his home; so come along.

"My right hand, which held your pistol, was concealed in the folds of my skirt, and before he could defend himself, I had aimed and fired, the ball passing through his shoulder and the shock throwing him from his horse.

"I do not think he is as much hurt as he appears; but for fear of serious results, I bound up his wounds, first taking the precaution to remove his weapons," and she pointed to a belt lying near, in which were two magnificent, ivory-handled revolvers.

Jumping down beside the wounded man, Kit examined him carefully, and then, with a decided sneer on his handsome face, exclaimed, with a kick:

"Here, quit your shamming, and scatter for home. I'll give you just three minutes to get out of sight," and he emphasized his remark with a click of his revolver.

The prostrate man did not wait for a second bidding, but sprang to his feet, and with an agility which proved how slight his wound was, started off up the hill, being halted, however, before he had gone many steps, by Kit, who called out to him:

"Take that handkerchief from your shoulder and hand it to me. No man of your stripe can wear Miss Danford's property off in that manner and boast of the trophy afterward."

Sullenly the man obeyed, and then in obedience to Kit's repeated order, he hurried off and was soon lost to view.

"Oh, thank you!" cried Miss Danford, as Kit handed her hat to her, she quickly and deftly placing it on and fastening it to her sunny locks.

"But those men who were killed by the lightning: who will give them the burial that every man deserves?"

"They are not quite ready for burial yet and are the liveliest corpses I ever encountered, as witness this scratch on my cheek."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"That they were only stunned by the flash, as we were. One of them, the man who had the spot on his temple, was probably instantly killed, although they had probably carried his body into the house."

And Kit related to her his adventures in the valley, and his surprise at finding that the supposed corpses had disappeared.

"Then," said the girl, solemnly, "Heaven has left my vengeance to myself. I thought that the thunderbolt had destroyed my father's murderers, but my vow must be fulfilled. I swore by my father's blood to track them to their graves, and as soon as my father is in his grave I begin my work of vengeance!"

"And whatever I can do that will aid you, Dainty, will be only too willingly done; you believe me do you not?"

"As I believe in Heaven!"

And again the hands met and their eyes dwelt in the liquid depths of each other until Dainty read something in Kit's eyes which caused her to color and turn her head.

But as they at length cantered along the road and came in sight of the house where the dead man lay, they saw that it was in flames, and with a cry of horror they dashed wildly forward.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE JAWS OF DEATH.

THE horror-stricken expression of the young girl was enough for Kit, for he saw that she was thinking that in those flames her father's body was being consumed, and that only a few charred bones, if anything, would be left to bury.

So, dashing up to the front of the blazing house and leaping from his horse, he sprang toward the door and endeavored to open it.

But Colton had locked it, and as the door opened outward he was unable to break it down, so looked about for other means of entrance.

But the windows were all closed with heavy wooden shutters, which were also firmly bolted inside, and he saw no way by which he could force his way inside.

The flames were now leaping high above the roof, which threatened at any moment to fall in, and Dainty, seeing that if he did succeed in entering it would be at the imminent peril of his life, called out to him and begged him to give up the attempt and not risk the danger.

But Kit, when he had once undertaken anything, almost invariably carried it through, so, running around to the back of the house, he discovered that by climbing up on the lean-to which constituted the stable, he could gain the

roof of the cabin and then probably drop down the chimney, which was huge and wide.

Quickly scrambling up, before the girl could fully comprehend his intention, he climbed to the edge of the chimney, lowered himself into it by his hands and dropped out of sight.

Minutes that seemed hours passed by, and Dainty sat there, waiting and watching, until finally one of the closed shutters was flung violently open and at the window Kit appeared.

He was bearing something which made him stagger beneath its weight, and which, on being lifted up, proved to be a buffalo-robe, in which something was carefully wrapped, and it was not difficult for Dainty to divine what that "something" was.

She could but admire the consideration of the young man who, to spare her feelings as much as possible, had taken time in the midst of this whirlwind of smoke and flame to carefully enfold her father's body in the buffalo-robe which had been his bed during his life.

Tenderly raising his burden and lifting it outside the window, he gently lowered it and deposited it on the ground where no sparks could fall on the robe, for the wind was blowing from the front and swept the smoke and flame and burning particles of wood, that rose in the air, toward the back of the house.

Having thus cared for his burden, Kit turned to cast a last look around to see if there were anything in sight worth saving, when, without a moment's warning, the roof fell in, while a cloud of smoke and flame and sparks shot high in the air.

The piercing scream uttered by the girl, and which echoed far away among the hills, was almost instantly drowned by the crash of the falling timbers, and then all was still.

Choked for an instant by the falling mass the fire smoldered for a moment, and then the flames burst out with renewed fury, and the heat became so intense that the buffalo-robe, in which the corpse was wrapped, began to scorch and burn.

Regardless of the heat and smoke, Dainty, who had dismounted some time before, rushed up to the burning building, seized the robe, and exerting all of her frail strength, succeeded in dragging it some distance from the spot and beyond all danger of burning.

And then her next thought was for Kit.

Looking at the roof, she saw that the fire was still confined to the end of the house opposite to that on which stood the chimney, and knowing that the flue was built of rough stones and plastered mud, realized that she could easily climb down and up again without any danger.

For no smoke came from the chimney, and she was convinced that the draught was in the other direction.

Hesitating not an instant, and praying that she might be able to render some assistance to Kit, she ran around the house, and with some little difficulty clambered upon the lean-to and thence to the roof, where she stopped a moment to rest, so wildly did her heart beat.

But as she stood there a pistol-shot rung out from the room below, so startling her that she nearly lost her balance and came within an inch of falling to the ground below.

Was it a signal, or had the fire reached Kit's body, and did the report mean that the flames had so heated the pistol as to cause its discharge?

With hand pressed hard on her throbbing breast, and every sense on the alert, she waited, listening for a second report.

If it came instantly, then indeed must it be the result of a heated cylinder; but if it was delayed a few moments—no matter how few—then she would know that Kit still lived and was signaling to her.

Imperative as it was that she should hasten, she could no more have moved than with a tear she could have extinguished those roaring flames, every muscle seeming paralyzed as she listened.

After what seemed an age a second shot was fired, and as if it had been a signal to free her from the chains which held her, her muscles regained their strength, her brain its clearness, her heart resumed its quiet beatings, as with firm step she walked over the roof to the chimney.

To her, strong and active as she was, the descending of the flue was a simple matter, so tying her riding-skirt tightly about her with the cord she wore for that purpose for convenience in walking, she stepped on the chimney-ledge, and with all the grace and ease of a skilled athlete, lowered herself into the grimy, sooty flue.

In a moment she reached the bottom, and the

sight that met her eyes was one well calculated to unnerve a stronger person than she.

The end of the room opposite to where she stood was one seething mass of glowing embers and leaping flame, the fiery tongues springing high in the air through the opening above where the roof had fallen in.

This was her salvation, for owing to the fire being at the other end and the heat pouring out through the roof, the draft was down the chimney, in the fireplace of which she stood, and she found no difficulty in breathing.

The heat was, however, intense, and already her dress began to smoke and scorch, while the ostrich feather in her hat was instantly shriveled into nothingness.

And just in front of her, face downward on the floor, and pinned there by a huge beam that had fallen across his back, lay Kit, unable to move, while the flames were slowly creeping nearer and nearer.

And with a murmured prayer, Dainty sunk to the floor and crawled toward him.

CHAPTER X.

RESCUED!

CROUCHING low to the floor, to avoid as much as possible the heat and smoke, Dainty crept on until at length she reached the spot where Kit was lying helpless, just as he fired another shot, for he had succeeded in worming his hand down to his belt, drawing one of his pistols and firing it as a signal.

He had begun to despair, for what could a frail girl do with this mighty weight that crushed him to the floor and rendered him helpless, even if she should hear his signal above the crackling and the roaring of the flames?

So he had about given up all hope, and was rervring himself to undergo the fearful torture that threatened him, when a voice that sounded like an angel's tones fell on his ears, as Dainty bent over him and whispered:

"As you saved me, so will I save you!"

And rising nearly to her full height, she grasped the beam, which was wedged in a mass of rubbish at either end, and pulled on it with all the nervous strength of her frail hands.

But the effort was as the power of a pigmy exerted against a Samson, for not the thousandth part of an inch did the beam move.

Try and push and pull and drag as she would she could not succeed in affording Kit, who was cruelly bruised by the weight across his loins, an instant's relief, nor could she raise the beam in the slightest degree.

So it seemed as if Kit were doomed to die a terrible and a lingering death, and calling to her as loudly as he could, his voice caught her ear and she bent to listen to what he had to say:

"It is useless; you had best save yourself before you are injured by the heat and smoke."

"What care I for pain, so long as there is the slightest chance of saving you?"

"But, Dainty, I am doomed."

"Your frail strength can never move this weight that crushes me and renders me powerless to aid you in your efforts to release me."

"Go and live long and happily, and think of me sometimes."

"I will always think of you, Kit, as the truest, noblest friend I ever had and—"

"Do not talk that way, Dainty! You only make death harder to bear."

"Oh!" he cried, bitterly. "It is hard thus to die, caught like a wolf in a trap!"

At the word a wild shriek burst from the parted lips of the girl, as she cried:

"Saved! Saved! You are saved!"

And hysterically laughing and crying, she again sunk to the floor, crawled a little nearer the flame, and forcing her hand under the beam, which lay across Kit's body, drew a bolt, after some little difficulty, and the floor giving way, Kit, with a loud cry of startled surprise, fell headlong through the opening, striking on the ground below with a tremendous thud, but being uninjured.

In an instant Dainty was beside him, having descended by means of the steps which led into the cellar, she having opened the trap-door which gave access to it, and on which, most providentially, Kit happened to be lying.

Dainty had closed the door, and they found themselves in utter darkness, and in a close and stifling atmosphere, but which was still an improvement on the furnace above.

"This is but a temporary respite, after all," said Kit, "and you, foolish child that you are, instead of escaping, have sought your tomb with me."

"The fire will soon eat through the floor and

he will be roasted in here like a fox in his burrow.

"Dainty, Dainty, why did you make me responsible for your death?"

"I am not dead yet, nor are you."

"Do you feel able to walk?"

"A little sore across the back, but able to walk for miles."

"But why do you ask? We can not enjoy a very extensive promenade in this cellar!"

"Don't laugh at my cellar. If it were not for it you would now be in a sad plight."

"I had forgotten all about it until you mentioned the word 'trap,' when it flashed upon me all at once that you were lying just over the door."

"But give me your hand, and follow."

"It is getting warm here and hotter every minute."

"A breath of air will be very acceptable."

"I only hope you may find it!" muttered Kit, as he took the small hand extended to him and followed willingly.

Much to his surprise the cellar, which he supposed would at least be no longer than the length of the house, seemed to extend indefinitely and they walked on for some minutes without stopping.

At length they apparently arrived at a door, judging from the sound of a key grating in a lock, and he having followed Dainty through it, was warned to look out for the steps, which he ascended to the number of a dozen or so, the door clanging to behind him as he released it.

Not stopping as suddenly as he was told to do by Dainty, alongside of whom he had ascended the steps, his head came in sharp contact with some solid substance above, and which on the girl's opening it, proved to be a second trap-door, through which they passed into daylight.

And as he gazed about him, Kit could not suppress a cry of astonishment, for he found himself inside the hollow trunk of a huge tree, the place in which he stood being some six feet square.

High up in the side was a hole through which the light poured, rendering all about him as plainly visible as if outside under the clear sky, and by it he could examine the surroundings perfectly.

But short time was given him for reflection, as Dainty, turning to him, asked him if he felt able to climb up to the hole above and see if there were any one in sight, and he replying in the affirmative, rapidly clambered up to the lookout-place by means of slats nailed to the interior of the trunk.

At first he looked out cautiously, but seeing no one about—for that portion of the country was generally deserted, he projected his head and looked about him.

He could scarce suppress a word of wonder, for the tree grew just on the edge of a precipice some six hundred feet high, and it was into these depths he was gazing.

Dainty had instructed him to push a small case, he would find inside, out of the hole and to remove the cover, doing which he found that the box contained a mirror, and that by moving it about in various directions on its hinged iron rods, the whole extent of country on the other side of the tree was plainly visible to him.

He could see in all directions without any risk of being seen.

He was admiring the ingenuity of the device, and was carefully examining the country, when he was recalled to a sense of his surroundings by the reproachful tones of the young girl who seemed to think that she was entirely forgotten.

So folding back the case inside the tree, he rapidly descended and joined Dainty below.

CHAPTER XI.

AN EVENING BURIAL.

"PARDON my remaining so long away," he explained, "but being entirely unfamiliar with the workings of that ingenious arrangement up there, I could not, at first, adjust it exactly."

"I thought that you had entirely forgotten that I was here."

"Not at all, nor have I forgotten that you have a duty to perform, in which I must aid you."

"Your father must be buried to-day, and already the sun is sinking low in the west."

"Then come," cried the girl, and going to the side of the tree that overhung the precipice, she unloosened a catch, and a door, skillfully cut through the bark, swung easily outward.

"Take care!" she warned him.

"The ledge is very narrow, and you will fall if you are not extremely careful."

"And you?"

"Oh! I am accustomed to it."

"Swing the door after you are outside and it will catch with the spring-lock."

"And can it be opened from the outside?"

"By any one who has the secret, yes."

As she spoke she swung herself around the massive trunk with the quickness of a squirrel, while Kit, following more deliberately and supporting himself by the tough vine which covered the tree, swung the door to.

It closed with a snap, and he saw that owing to the thickly-matted vine, the closest scrutiny would fail to reveal any artificial opening in the trunk.

Joining Dainty, he walked rapidly away, but turning to look, he found that he could not distinguish the hollow tree from a dozen or twenty others which, like monarchs of the forest in size, grew along the edge of the precipice.

It was some distance to the burning house, and they walked along in silence, for Kit respected the sorrow of the young girl, which grew more and more profound as the hour approached when she must bid a final farewell to her father.

Arrived at the house, which was yet burning fiercely, Kit, without a word, left Dainty, and going to an out-house near by, took from there a pick and shovel, and plunging into the wood, selected a grassy plot, shaded by a gigantic pine tree, and here he began to dig a grave, first cutting the turf carefully away.

Owing to the nature of the soil, which was rocky and difficult to dig, the task occupied him some time, and it was not until the sun had set that the receptacle was ready for the body.

Returning to Dainty whom he found watching by her father's body, which was still enveloped in the buffalo-robe, although she had thrown the edge of it back that she might look for the last time on the beloved features, he removed his hat and stood patiently by.

The girl, who had washed away the gory stains from the wound, and brushed the long, white locks over the bullet-hole, for a time seemed unconscious of his presence, but at length roused herself and cast a look of inquiry upon him.

He bent his head silently in response, and she, rising with a deep sigh, walked in the direction whence he had come.

Kit, who, though so slight, was possessed of immense strength, lifted the dead man from the ground and followed her, walking slowly until they had arrived at the grave, when he laid the body gently on the turf.

He realized that words of condolence would be a hollow mockery at such a time and under such circumstances, but he deemed it imperative that Dainty should secure whatever papers or letters or valuables the pockets of her murdered father might contain, and so suggested to her.

"Please look, then, if you think it best: any memento of my father would be of the highest value to me."

And obeying her request he reverently began his search, finding nothing, however, but a small locket, suspended about the dead man's neck by a plaited leathern cord.

This, without a word, he handed to Dainty.

Mechanically she took it, mechanically she opened it, when a small piece of folded paper fell to the ground which Kit picked up and returned to her.

Unfolding it she glanced at the few written words it contained, and then handed it to Kit, who read as follows:

"Should anything unexpected happen to me, Dainty, you will find my will find a schedule of my property in the tin box in the corner cupboard."

This was all.

"The message from the dead comes too late to the living," she murmured.

"The box and papers are long since destroyed by the fire which has destroyed my home!"

"It is a doubly unfortunate accident at this time."

"It was no accident, I'll dare swear," broke in Kit.

"All the circumstances point to incendiarism."

"There was no fire in the house, and I noticed that the lamp, which was doubtless lighted when you were dragged away, stood on the floor beside your father's body, where you had placed it, empty, having burned itself out."

"The house was set on fire, after having been robbed, for there were footprints in the ashes of the fireplace when I dropped down into them, which I plainly saw."

"No doubt the man you shot, and who belongs to Colton's band, was acting under orders from his leader, stole the box and then fired the house to hide his crime."

"Fool that I was to let him go!"

"We must talk of that later; my father demands our attention now."

And carrying out her wishes, Kit laid the body quietly in the grave, the fur robe its coffin and its winding-sheet, its requiem the sobs of the girl, who cried as if her heart would break.

And then, the grave being filled and the turf carefully spread over it, Dainty became suddenly quiet, and kneeling beside the grave, took from her bosom the kid glove which Kit had torn from his hand after striking Hercules, raised it high toward Heaven and cried:

"Again, my father, who art watching over me to-night, I swear to avenge your death and to follow your murderers to their graves!"

And rising, she uttered the single word, "Come!" and led the way to where their horses were grazing.

Mounting, in a few moments they had reached the mysterious tree, when the horses were unsaddled and unbridled and turned loose, and, still following the girl, Kit swung around and entered the tree, when Dainty disappeared down the steps, and almost immediately returned with a goodly supply of cold meat and bread, and some cold coffee, of which Kit partook ravenously.

Then again descending, she, saying:

"I have a room below,"

shot the bolt in the lower side of the trap and sought her couch, while Kit, too tired to think, threw himself on a pile of skins at one side of the hollow trunk and in a moment was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XII.

A STARTLING PROPOSITION.

A LONG rest completely restored Kit, and when he awakened the next morning, and, having taken an observation from the lookout hole and satisfied himself that no one was in sight, had stepped out to look after the horses and taken a good wash in a little brook which ran near by, he felt like a new man.

The two horses he found grazing quietly near, and after a short walk along the edge of the precipice, which overhung an inaccessible canyon, into which the stream plunged with a magnificent leap, he returned to the tree, where he found Dainty awaiting him.

She looked charming, her beauty heightened by a look of sadness which had settled over her features.

But there was an expression of stern resolve about her chin and clear-cut mouth, that denoted that she had stepped from girlhood to womanhood in a short thirty-six hours, and that her one aim and object in life was vengeance on her father's assassins.

Requesting Kit to follow her, she descended the steps which led into the underground passage and after going a short distance, turned to the right and opened a door which led into a lateral passage, at the end of which was a small room, cut out of the solid earth and fitted up as a kitchen.

An oil stove occupied one corner and a table and three or four chairs completed the furniture of the apartment.

Light was obtained from a small hole cut through the bank and overlooking the canyon before mentioned.

Here Dainty had prepared an appetizing breakfast, to which Kit did full justice, while the girl forced herself to eat, doubtless realizing that it was of the utmost importance that she should preserve her strength.

During the meal she explained to her companion that her father had gained the ill-will of the miners by declining to associate with them or join in their carousals and that invariably when he came in contact with them, harsh words followed.

He was much more refined and intelligent than the rest of the dwellers in the region, and was dubbed "Aristocrat" on account of his gentler birth.

Fearing that he might have trouble with them at any time, he had constructed this passage to the tree, having discovered by accident that the latter was hollow, and dug out the rooms alone and unaided.

Now that the house was destroyed and the ruins had fallen into the cellar, no one would ever discover that end of the passage, while thanks to the ingenious arrangement of the mirror, they could always scan the country before going out, and thus avoid detection.

"But now," continued Dainty, as Kit pushed his chair slightly away from the table, having finished his breakfast, "advise me what plan I had better pursue; for you know I will never rest until I have avenged my father."

"I thought about that, this morning, while I was walking around."

"But first of all you must understand one thing, positively:

"In all your actions I am with you, heart, soul and strength."

"Thank you, my friend, I know that."

"Now would it not be better for you to remain quiet either here or at any other place you may choose, even to go to Denver, and let me remain here and be the instrument of your vengeance?"

"To that I never will consent!"

"I have sworn over my father's blood, over his grave, to wreak my vengeance myself, and to fulfilling this oath I henceforth devote my every energy, my every moment!"

"Then so be it; now listen to my plan."

And he drew his chair up to the table again, while the girl listened intently.

"As well as I can judge," continued the young man, "we are each the living image of the other, a fact that is more remarkable as it is certain that we are in no manner related."

"Cut your hair a little shorter, so that it will be the same length as mine, clothe us alike and I defy any one, even a person intimately acquainted with us both to tell us apart."

A slight suspicion of what Kit intended to convey caused a faint blush to mantle Dainty's cheek, but she nodded to him to continue.

"A woman," pursued the lad, "is invariably hampered by her sex, when she undertakes a man's work, so my advice to you is to become a man, in appearance, if not in reality."

"Dressed alike as we would be, each the living counterpart of the other, and your enemies, who are now mine, would be continually non-plused and baffled, and with you here, me there, they would not be able to comprehend the sudden appearance and disappearance of the person whom they would think miles and miles away."

"Superstitious as all criminals are, they would be brought to the belief that there was something supernatural about me, for they would never suspect that you were disguised to resemble Kid-Glove Kit, and would believe that you had left this section of the country."

"Your vengeance must be something terrible, unheard of, besides which you owe it to your dead father to regain possession of the property that he guarded for you, and for which he undoubtedly lost his life."

"Separated as we will be very often, it will be necessary for you to have some means of communicating with me if you are in danger or trouble."

"You can always purchase a messenger, and if you desire my presence, send me the glove that you have which I threw away, write your message inside, and I will come as fast as horse-flesh can bring me."

"But there is one obstacle to your plan, feasible as it otherwise seems to me."

"It is humiliating to confess it, maybe, but—I have no money."

"Do not let that worry you, I have an ample supply; if you object to taking it, consider it a loan; you can repay me when we obtain your father's papers; for I am certain that he would not have preserved that scrap of paper so carefully had there not been something of value connected with it."

And slinging the Russian leather bag he carried on the table, he unlocked it with a small key he carried fastened about his neck by a gold chain, and placed the contents on the cloth in front of him.

A small package, wrapped in tissue paper, he tossed carelessly aside, and then, picking up a roll of bank-notes, he opened it and counted the bills one by one.

"Ten thousand and a few hundred dollars," he said as he finished.

"That is our fortune; let us begin to-day, and see if it will not be sufficient to accomplish our ends!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A BAD CROWD.

DIVIDING the sum he possessed into two equal portions, he handed one of them to Dainty, who hesitated a moment, and then, extending her hand, took it, smiling on him divinely, and saying:

"I accept this as a loan, in the same spirit in which it is offered."

"But how can I ever thank you!"

"I may tell you at some future time, not now."

"But I must be off to my den, and procure you clothing suitable to your new role."

"You will remain here until I return?"

"Most certainly."

"Is your—den," as you call it, far from here?"

"Ten miles as the crow flies, nearer fifteen by the road."

"I have there a suit identically similar to this one," designating his own attire, "which has never been worn."

"I think it will fit you to a T."

"You are kindness itself, and overwhelm me with favors."

"It is not worth mentioning."

"But before I go, try on a pair of these."

And Kit untied the tissue-paper parcel he had drawn from the leather bag, took from it a dozen pair of exquisitely tinted lavender kid gloves, one pair of which he handed to Dainty.

"If you want to be my double," he laughed, "you must never appear in public without wearing a pair of these."

"Kid-Glove Kit" would soon lose his title if you neglected this precaution."

Dainty took the gloves and slipped them on her slim fingers, where they fitted as if made for her, so small and delicate was Kit's hand.

"Excellent!" he cried, "the only problem that worried me is solved; for if my gloves did not fit you, I should be at a loss where to procure any in this region."

"I have plenty more stored away, so do not hesitate to abuse them."

"Would you mind letting me have one of your shoes for a moment?"

Dainty without hesitation handed him a high-laced gaiter from a number in an adjoining closet, and he, removing his boot, easily slipped it on his slim foot over his silk sock, where it fitted like wax.

"Nothing could be better; you can wear a pair of boots that I have and I can fit you out from sole to crown."

"In about two hours expect me."

"You can reach the observatory?"

"I have climbed up there a hundred times, when I was looking for father."

"Then you can see me coming and open the door for me."

"For a short time, farewell!"

"Good-by, and take good care of yourself, Kit."

It was the first time she had called him by his name, and he thought that the monosyllable had never sounded musical before, and would have had her repeat it, but rousing himself with an effort, he put on his boot, stuffed his gloves and money into the bag he carried, and without another word, left the room.

That the girl's thoughts were pleasant ones, was evinced by the quiet smile that played about her lips, as she sat there for some time after Kit had left the room.

But finally, heaving a deep sigh as she rose, she murmured:

"How generous, how noble, how brave he is!"

And then, as if awakening from a pleasant reverie, she again sighed and then began to busy herself deftly with her household duties, moving lightly and quickly about the room, until everything was in perfect order.

Kit, meanwhile, had saddled and bridled his horse, and mounting, had ridden rapidly away, having first assured himself that there was no one in sight.

Striking the main road, he galloped along it for a distance of five miles or so, in the direction opposite to that which Dainty had followed the day before, when the prisoner of Colton, until he came to a small mining village known as The Gulch, and which consisted of a long, straggling street of twenty or thirty houses, every other one of which was a gambling and a drinking saloon combined.

It was the dull hour of the day, for the miners were all at work, and it was only in the evening that these resorts did any business, so that in the majority of cases the proprietors or barkeepers of the gin-mills were sunning themselves at the front doors of their saloons.

On Kit came, galloping up the street, his long hair streaming behind him, while his exquisitely gloved hand held the reins carelessly, he having put on a new pair of kids before starting on his ride—many rude and sarcastic remarks were shouted after him from the occupants of the doorways.

"Get onter his nibs, Billie," said one. "Wonder when ther circus is a-comin' ter town."

"Tain't no 'him,'" shouted another, from

across the street; "it's a gurl dressed up to maskerade."

"Stag his kids; ain't them purty dukes fer a prize-fight?"

"He's a pony-express rider," chimed in another. "Don't yer see his mail-bag slung ter his bloomin' side?"

"E's a Queen's messenger, 'e is," cried a brawny Cockney, "a-carryin' news hof the war in Hegypt to the guv'ner."

"Hyar, my young bantam, git down off'n that horse, an' come in an' set 'em up fer ther boys; their throats is dead dry from conversin' wid you."

And a six-foot barkeeper, whose face was scarred with the wounds from a hundred rough-and-tumble fights, grasped his horse by the nostrils, and brought him to a dead stop.

Kit smiled sarcastically, although a nervous twitching of his nostrils and a deep-red spot that suddenly glowed on each cheek would have warned any one familiar with him to look out for trouble.

But dropping the reins on his horse's neck, he began quietly to draw off his left glove, while he replied:

"And suppose I decline?"

"Then we'll make yer!" growled the barkeeper—"won't we, boys?"

And he turned to the crowd of roughs that had by this time gathered about them, while he still restrained the horse, having shifted his grasp to the bit.

"You bet!"

"We don't want no frills—pony up!"

"Git down and walk up to the bar like a man and set 'em up!"

"Cockey there'll give you some goat's milk, ef lemon-an'-sugar's too strong for yer."

This sally produced a laugh, and when it had subsided, Kit answered:

"I'll see the whole b'lin' of you to the North Pole and back, before I'll spend a nickel on such a gang of cut-throats as you!"

A yell of rage arose at these words, and the crowd was about to rush on and pull him from his horse, when the powerful voice of the barkeeper was heard, high above the tumult:

"Leave him to me, boys. I'll fix him!"

And sliding his hand along the rein, he walked back toward Kit, who sat coolly awaiting whatever was to follow.

CHAPTER XIV.

KIT'S "DEN."

QUIETLY turning in his saddle so as to face the ruffian, as he came up to his left side, Kit threw himself back the slightest possible distance, and, looking straight down into the other's shifty eyes, accosted him:

"Now, look here, I'm not seeking any trouble, and if any follows, it will be of your own making."

"All right, my chicken, we'll risk ther consequences. But now ther question is, will yer treat, or must we make yer?"

"I won't treat, and you won't make me!"

"See hyar, youngster yer' a-bitin' off a heap more nor yer can chew. Better pony up, an' save thim nice clothes yer' a-wearin'!"

And the six-footer laid his brawny, grimy paw on Kit's knee.

Kit extended his hand and brushed the huge fist away as if it had been a fly, and then in the most insulting manner in the world, coolly dusted his trousers with the glove he held in his right hand, as if the touch had contaminated him.

The gesture and the act added immediate fuel to the already aroused anger of the rumseller, so, releasing the bridle, he stepped forward, with both hands extended, to seize Kit, and drag him from his horse.

But as he came within reaching distance, Kit's small clinched left hand shot straight from his shoulder with the rapidity of an electric flash, and as it came in contact with the right eye of the bully, the blood spattered in a red rain, right and left, and "Cockey," falling straight back, lay like a dead man on the ground.

At the instant the blow was delivered, Kit called to his horse, and the intelligent brute sprang forward, knocking the crowd in front in every direction, while Kit, twisting around in his seat with all the skill of a professional horseman, faced the mob behind him, a cocked revolver in each hand, and cried:

"The first man who puts hand to belt, dies!"

And, the gang of cut-throats being completely overawed, he galloped off down the street, unharmed, and soon left the town far behind him.

Relaxing his pace as he reached the open

country and resuming his normal position in the saddle, Kit replaced his revolvers in his belt, again put on his glove, and, as his horse walked along, thus soliloquized:

"Fifteen minutes, at least, lost in that little squabble, and Dainty waiting."

"No more of that, my boy, at least for the present."

"But as it was not my fault and I could not avoid it, I suppose there is no use worrying about the matter."

"Come, Dick, we must make up for lost time!"

And lifting his horse into a canter, he loped rapidly along until he arrived at a point where the road ran between two high banks, both of which were abrupt as the sides of a house.

But, scanning the face of one of the banks, and evidently washed out by the spring's floods when the snows above melted, was a gully, in which grew a luxuriant mass of bushes, seemingly impenetrable.

No one, it would seem, would care to endeavor to climb up this ravine, as there was apparently nothing to be gained by so doing, but Kit evidently was not of that opinion.

Dismounting and removing saddle and bridle, he gave the horse a gentle slap on the flank, and with a farewell whinny, the bay trotted up the road, evidently seeking a pasture with which he was familiar.

Casting a hasty glance up and down the road, so as to be sure he was unobserved, Kit then plunged into the undergrowth, carrying his bridle and saddle with him, and scrambled up the decidedly steep incline of the gully.

Some rods up he came to a place where lay the trunks of two trees, side by side, they having evidently been washed down from the summit of the bluff by some unusually powerful freshet.

Masses of tangled brush were piled and heaped on them and the ends of the logs were completely hidden by the heaps of dead branches that lay, scattered about, and there was no trace of human being visible anywhere.

But Kit, depositing his burden on the ground, caught hold of a huge branch that projected from the pile, pushed it to one side and the entire heap of brush moved away, disclosing the ends of the logs.

Between them was a space of three or four feet, and hiding his horse furniture in a thicket near by, Kit, lying down, wormed his way feet foremost, into the opening, pulled the stick which acted as a lever and the pile of brush, moving back into place, resumed its normal condition.

Moving carefully backward, and lying on his back, Kit continued his progress until he encountered a smooth surface, which seemed to be made of planks, when, feeling on the right, he grasped a rope that hung taut, and, holding it firmly, immediately sat upright.

He was in total darkness, but was evidently thoroughly familiar with his surroundings, for, allowing the rope to slip slowly through his hands, he descended to the distance of a hundred feet, when the trap on which he was seated stopped and he stepped off.

Feeling about for a moment, his hand encountered a shelf, from which he took a box of matches, and quickly struck one, then lighted a lantern which swung from the ceiling a foot or two above his head.

Then, having seen that the catch which held the trap was secure, he walked along the corridor for a short distance until he came to a large, vaulted room, which, when a second lamp was lighted, was dazzling in its beauty.

The room was some twenty feet square, and the same number of feet in height, the sides and top glowing with a dull yellow, which betokened the presence of immense quantities of gold-bearing quartz, rich beyond the wildest dreams of the most avaricious miner.

The chamber was perfectly dry and the air perfectly pure, the room doubtless being ventilated by some unseen air-shaft; while the floor was six inches deep in fine sand, in which sparkled thousands of golden nuggets, ranging in size from a pin-head to a pea, some of them being even larger than that.

In one corner stood a huge chest, evidently constructed in the room, for it would have been impossible to bring it there by means of the shaft down which Kit had descended from the outer world.

Such was Kit's "den."

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY.

THIS "den" was a veritable store-house of wealth, and it could easily be seen how Kit

could afford to dress in the expensive garb he always wore, and manage to carry ten thousand dollars about with him so carelessly.

Millions were in sight, and millions more were doubtless hidden behind the rocky walls of the cavern, whence a few strokes of the pick would dislodge them.

But without even casting a glance at this immense wealth, Kit hastened to the chest, opened it, lifted out the tray, which was jammed full of bundles of bank-notes, and placed it on the floor.

In the bottom of the chest were at least twenty suits of clothes such as Kit always wore—boots, hats, each one of the former with a gold spur attached to the heel, each one of the latter with an immense diamond sparkling in the buckle; while at one side were packed a dozen belts, identical with the one worn by Kit, all containing a pair of revolvers and a knife.

Each of the belts also contained a store of cartridges, and was ready for instant wear.

Taking out two complete suits, with two hats and a couple of pairs of boots, Kit replaced the tray and closed the lid of the chest with a bang.

A pair of saddle-bags hung on one of a number of wooden pegs driven into the wall at one side of the vaulted room, and in these Kit carefully packed the articles he had selected, and then, extinguishing the lamp, left the cavern by the same corridor through which he had entered it.

Again seating himself on the trap and placing his saddle-bags beside him, he caught the rope, and pulling on it steadily, hand over hand, he hoisted himself to the top, his labor being lessened by a weight attached to the other end of the cord which pulled him up.

Fastening the platform in place, he crawled out of the space between the two logs, carrying his parcel with him, moved the pile of brush, stepped out into the open air, and looked about.

No one was in sight, and collecting together his traps, he climbed down the gully, drew his right-hand revolver and fired a shot in the air, the report echoing afar.

Scarcely had the reverberations died away, when in answer to the signal, for such it was, his horse came galloping down the road, stopping alongside Kit and rubbing his nose affectionately against his shoulder.

Dick was soon saddled and bridled and Kit, flinging the saddle-bags on the horse's back and securing them to the cantle, mounted and rode back toward The Gulch.

He had not been more than an hour away, and he could see that little groups of men were gathered in front of the "Gold Dust" saloon, over the destinies of which "Cockey" presided.

They were evidently discussing the late occurrences, and as it was necessary that Kit should pass down that street, he anticipated, and nerved himself for, trouble.

The men were gesticulating and evidently talking loudly, apparently being much excited, and as there were a couple of dozen of them standing about, Kit realized that he had considerable of an undertaking before him.

But he cantered on, until suddenly it became evident that he had been seen, judging from the general movement and pointing that followed it.

Loosening his revolvers, he was about to spur up and dash as rapidly as he could through the threatening crowd, when he saw a man, whom he recognized as a gambler, known as "Faro Frank," leave the group in front of the "Gold Dust" and walk rapidly toward him.

Frank was faultlessly attired in the finest broadcloth, and wore a shiny silk hat, his appearance betokening financial ease and perfect content with himself and all mankind.

He belonged in Denver, where Kit had seen him before coming to The Gulch, for the lad had only been in the country forty-eight hours, and had never before that day, seen the town, or rather village, by daylight.

As soon as the gambler arrived within hailing distance he stopped, and called out to Kit, holding meantime, his switch cane across his shoulders to show that he carried no weapon in his hands.

"Put up your guns, young fellow"—for Kit had drawn and cocked his revolvers.

"You won't need them here to-day."

Kit, seeing that but one man confronted him, slid his pistols back into their resting-places and quietly awaited what the other had to say.

"The boys just told me about your knocking Cockey cold," continued Faro Frank, "and I swear it's the pluckiest thing I ever heard of in my wild and varied career."

"The idea of a slender young fellow like you possessing such strength; they say that when you struck out the blow sounded like the kick of a mule."

"I'm with you, and no harm comes to you this day, I'll see to that."

"Come and have a drink."

"Much obliged," returned Kit, laconically, "I never drink."

"A cigar then."

"Never smoke."

"Well, hang it, take a lemonade."

"Since you insist, I will."

"I feel a little thirsty and a sour lemonade won't go bad."

"This isn't a steer your giving me?"

"On the word of Frank Francis, I'm giving it to you dead straight."

"All right then, I'll join you."

And Kit knew that he was perfectly safe in so doing, for although Faro Frank was a confirmed gambler and the hero of a score of desperate knife and pistol fights, he had never gone back on his word.

In Denver, his honesty when he had pledged himself, was proverbial, and so well-known that every one relied on it.

So Kit rode quietly along, the gambler, who was a magnificently built man, eying the young fellow quizzically, and shaking his head and muttering to himself as if he found it impossible to comprehend how such a slight figure could possess such tremendous strength.

As they drew near the saloon, the crowd about the porch scowled and glared at Kit and several of them, evidently wishing to toady to Cockey, made threatening remarks.

But Frank stepped quickly forward and addressing them said:

"Look here, you fellows, this young gentleman is a friend of mine, and any one who insults him, insults me."

"So just keep civil tongues in your heads, or by the great horn spoon you'll regret it."

"You know me!"

"And I'm with you, Frank," remarked a quiet, determined-looking fellow, Frank's partner, as he stepped out from the saloon.

"You see, you are all right, so come on."

And Kit dismounting, entered the saloon, while the crowd about them slunk away from the angry glances Frank and his partner flung right and left.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BAR-ROOM ROW.

THERE were many persons in the saloon, and most of those who were standing outside, followed the trio through the swing doors, so that, once all were inside, so great was the crowd that it was almost impossible to move.

Elbowing his way up to the counter, Frank shoved every one in his way right and left, being closely followed by Diamond Dan, his partner, and Kit.

As the latter leaned on the bar, Cockey who was engaged at the other end spied him and came rapidly toward where he was standing.

Cockey was a total wreck, and looked as though he had been interviewed by a pile-driver.

His eye was beginning to color and promised in a short time to become a magnificent blending of blue, yellow, black and brown.

He had tied a handkerchief over it, but so ragged and full of holes was the bandage, that it did not conceal his injured optic in the least.

Before he could address a word to Kit, Frank, who cared for and feared no one on earth, called out to him:

"What's the matter with the eye, Cockey?"

"Looks like a rainbow in a fog."

An inarticulate growl was the only answer to this sarcastic speech, and Cockey, bringing down his massive fist with a tremendous thud on the counter, cried:

"If you've come in byar ter look fer a row, young feller, you'll get it sooner nor yer think."

"Git out o' my saloon!"

"Gently, Cockey, gently!" interposed Faro Frank, while Diamond Dan drew a little closer, and turning, faced the crowd behind his friend.

"This young gentleman is a friend of mine, so you just shut up and hustle 'round and get us our drinks."

"Now, look hyar, Frank Francis, you've been a-runnin' this yer town long enough, an' I'm hanged 'f I'm a-goin' ter stan' it any longer."

"An' as fur this yar young snip, 'f he don't vamose pretty considerable quick, I'll fling him through ther door, an' you, too!"

"Cockey, you're drunk."

"Give us those drinks, and pretty considerable quick, or we'll help ourselves."

"Yer will, will yer?"

"Now you jest scatter!"

And as he spoke he drew from beneath the counter a huge revolver, already cocked, which he thrust squarely into Faro Frank's face, the muzzle touching his forehead.

But with a movement like the spring of a panther, Kit caught the brawny wrist of the bully, and gave it a quick twist upward, while at the same instant Francis dropped to the floor behind the shelter of the counter.

The pistol was discharged, the bullet burying itself harmlessly in the ceiling overhead, and fell to the counter, and thence to the floor, while the barkeeper, seizing his right hand, fairly danced and howled with mingled pain and rage.

His wrist was dislocated.

But at the same time Cockey's partner, who was standing just behind Kit, and who was even stouter and taller and more powerful than Cockey, rushed on our hero with hand uplifted to administer a crushing downward blow.

Spat! And as Diamond Dan's right arm shot out, Blinkey, as he was affectionately termed, staggered back and would have inevitably fallen, had he not been caught by some of his friends.

Frank had arisen and turned to face the crowd, drawing a pair of wicked-looking derringers from his coat pockets as he did so, and cocking them, while Kit kept his attention directed toward Cockey, not knowing what might be the next move of that worthy.

But Cockey was just at that moment interested in nothing so much as his wrist, and was standing by the faucet, allowing the cold water to run over the injured member, which he had pulled back into place.

At sight of the wicked-looking weapons which Faro Frank held, the crowd, which a moment before had seemed inclined to side with the barkeepers, fell back as far as it could while some of the men began to sneak out of the door and hunt their homes.

Imitating Faro Frank's movement, Kit and Dan drew their weapons, and the trio, realizing that it would be foolish to remain any longer where they were, backed out of the saloon, confronting the crowd, and retreated to the street. Frank hurling back this parting threat:

"Remember! If any harm ever comes to my friend here, through you, Dan and I will see that he is terribly avenged!"

When they were once more in the street, Faro Frank turned to Kit, and slipping his derringers back into his pocket, extended his hand to Kit, and said:

"Well, you are a daisy."

"Cockey had me dead, and, as there is no love lost between us, would probably have wiped out old scores with a bullet through my head."

"You saved my life, undoubtedly, and we are staunch pals for life."

"Put her there!"

And grasping Kit's hand he shook it warmly, in which action he was seconded by Dan.

"Now I must leave you," remarked Kit, when they were through congratulating him.

"I am not at liberty to say what calls me away, but I am sure that when I tell you that it is most important that I should go, you will excuse me."

"Sure, pard, sure. If you have anything of importance to attend to, skip out."

"But, remember, should you ever need a friend, call on me, and if I'm not to be found, Dan here will see you through."

"You can plank down your chips on that, my boy, every time," assented Dan, while Kit thanked them warmly.

"But before you go, tell us what we shall call you," added Frank.

"My friends know me as Kid-Glove Kit, but simple Kit will do."

"Well, good-by, Kit, and good luck!"

"Good-by!"

And swinging himself into the saddle Kit cantered off down the street, while the two gamblers walked away to their rooms, where they soon forgot the last occurrence in the excitement of a little game.

It did not take long for Kit to reach the burned house, when branching off to the north, he galloped over the plain toward the hollow tree, fastening his horse in a thicket near by and then returning and entering the hollow trunk.

Stooping, he rapped at regular intervals, twice, three times, and then twice again, and, in a minute or two, the bolt was shot below, and,

lifting the trap, the fair face of Dainty appeared at the foot of the steps.

"You have been away much longer than you said," she called out, pouting prettily.

"And have had numerous adventures, which, when you have heard them, you will acknowledge excuse my protracted stay."

"Possibly," still pouting.

"But come down here and tell me about it."

And Kit, descending, closed the trap and followed her.

CHAPTER XVII.

A WESTERN FARO-BANK.

DAINTY listened with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes to Kit's narration, and when he had finished, extended her hand to him, and said:

"Forgive me, my friend, for my childish pettishness of a while ago."

"I should have known that something unusual had detained you, but with nothing but my sad thoughts for company, the day has been very long."

"And it is now too late to leave here, and it is best that you should have another good night's rest before we start out on the trail against Colton and his band."

"I have a plan which I think may prove a successful one, and to prepare it thoroughly I must return to The Gulch to-night."

"Your horse seemed a little lame yesterday."

"Yes, poor fellow; he stepped on a loose stone, night before last, as I was hurrying home, and evidently sprained his shoulder."

"Well, I will see that you have a better one to-morrow."

"In there," designating the saddle-bags, "you will find a complete outfit, and by the time I return in the morning I hope to find you all ready and prepared for an early start."

"It is a pity, and almost seems a sacrilege, but you must sacrifice some of your beautiful hair, so that it will be the same length as mine."

"Then you must act as barber."

"Very unwillingly, but it is absolutely necessary, and I will console myself with the thought that it will soon grow again."

A pair of shears was soon found, and Dainty having carefully measured the length of his hair, Kit gave a few scientific snips, and the masses of golden tresses were shortened by nearly a yard.

Carefully collecting the glittering strands, Kit wrapped them up and placed them in his leather sachel that hung at his side, remarking:

"These leave me only with my life!"

And then telling her that he had forgotten one or two necessary adjuncts to her costume, he advised her not to dress before he returned.

And then, after a hasty lunch, Kit rose, and telling Dainty not to worry if he were detained, but to wait patiently until he returned, was about to leave the room, when she called him back.

"You are going to venture into that awful place again?"

"It is absolutely necessary."

"Then pray—pray be very careful!"

"What would I do, should anything happen to you that would end seriously?"

"Do not fear. Life has become too precious to me within the past day or two for me to risk it foolishly."

"Good-by."

And Kit left the room, while Dainty, burying her face in her hands, whispered to herself:

"What could he have meant by that last remark he made?"

But her wildly beating heart answered her quickly, and her face settled into a tender smile, which yet played about her mouth when she slept.

For her dreams were of Kit!

The long street of The Gulch was one blaze of light as Kit rode into the village, kerosene torches flaring in front of the saloons from posts set at the edge of the road, while from the interior of the shanties came sounds of laughter, loud voices, the click of ivory checks and the rattle of the ivory ball spinning around the revolving roulette-wheel.

Riding up to a building which was somewhat more pretentious than its fellows, and which was ornamented with a sign bearing the inscription:

"THE GULCH HOTEL,"

Kit dismounted and gave his horse in charge of one of the stablemen, who was lounging near by, and requested him to take care of him for a time, emphasizing his directions by slip-

ping a five-dollar note into the fellow's ready hand.

"He'll be looked after as if he was a baby, sir," replied the hostler, doffing his hat and looking admiringly at Kit's magnificent mount. "A fine horse that, sir, and well suited to carry a fine gentleman like you."

And, as he led the horse off in the direction of the stables, Kit turned and walked up the street in search of Frank's place.

He opened the swing-doors of half a dozen resorts, but was disappointed, until at length he came to a low, single-story frame building that stood a little back from the street.

It was constructed of rough, unplanned boards, and did not boast of the slightest sign of paint; but on opening the door and stepping inside, he saw Frank seated back of a faro-table, about which was grouped a crowd of men three deep, each one intent on the bets that lay scattered about in every direction.

In the "lookout" chair was Diamond Dan, carefully watching that no mistakes were made in the bets.

Raising his eyes mechanically Frank recognized Kit, and instantly called out:

"Pete, a chair for Mr. Christopher. Here, some of you sitters, move out and let this gentleman have a place!"

And, as Kit walked forward, the negro attendant brought a chair, the crowd about the table who were seated squeezed together a little closer, Kit took a place directly opposite the dealer, and, diving into his pocket, produced a roll of bills.

"Give me a thousand dollars' worth, please," he said quietly, as he counted the money out on the table.

"Certainly; what price?"

"Oh, five hundred a stack."

"Then kid's a-goin' ter play twenty-five dollar checks, by gum!" muttered a grizzled old miner who sat near "keeping cases," and who had evidently found luck against him, as he did not have a single check in front of him.

Receiving his two stacks, Kit, as it was near the end of the deal, waited and looked about him.

Judging from the exterior, the interior was a complete surprise, for it was fitted up with an elegance that would have been no discredit to a Broadway bar-room.

Magnificent plate-glass mirrors stretched from the ceiling to the floor, many of them bearing on their polished surfaces the marks of numerous and sundry bullets, which had evidently more than once flown thick and fast here.

The bar-counter was constructed of exquisitely carved mahogany with a top rail of bird's-eye maple, while the foot-rest was heavily nickel-plated and shone like silver.

Dozens of cut-glass decanters, bottles and tumblers sparkled in their crystal purity on the shelf behind, while a half-dozen white-jacketed barkeepers were kept continually busy attending to the demands of their always thirsty patrons.

A roulette table occupied one side of the hall, while in a corner at the back part of the room, a round, green-covered table was surrounded by a number of men who were intent on a game of poker, "table stakes."

The place was crowded, and the air heavy with tobacco smoke, while nearly every one in the room was intent on one object—gain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUTTED OUT OF TIME.

As Kit finished his observations, the gruff voice of the case-keeper growled out:

"One turn and a call!"

And hostilities were suspended for a few moments to enable the players to make their final bets on the deal before the last cards were drawn from the box.

And then, as they were slipped out, various ejaculations arose from the crowd of betters, as they had won or lost.

"Called her that time!"

"Struck the turn at last!"

"Hang the deuce, she lost four times."

"Pay this bet, Mr. Dealer."

"Give me five hundred."

"I'll take another stack o' blues."

And the bets being collected and paid, the cards shuffled and again placed in the box, Kit turned his attention to the game, and scattered his checks about with a reckless profusion that caused even the usually imperturbable Frank to raise his eyebrows in slight amazement.

For two hours Kit sat there, playing with varying fortune, seeming entirely indifferent as to whether he won or lost.

At one time he had won forty-two thousand dollars, but not long afterward his ivory capital

was reduced to the hundreds; but at the end of the time mentioned, at the close of an unusually successful deal, on counting up his checks he found that he was exactly even, not having won or lost a dollar.

Being somewhat fatigued from sitting so long in the same position, he arose, his chair being instantly appropriated by one of the players who was standing behind him, and, slipping his checks in his pocket, walked away, calling back to the dealer:

"See you later, Frank."

He strolled about the room, from group to group, remarking as he did so, that there was not one of the men in the room that he had seen during his adventures at the Gold Dust, that crowd having been made up of bar and saloon-keepers, who were now evidently busy with their duties.

Again approaching the faro-table, he stood there a moment, when he was accosted by a tall, fair-haired young fellow of his own age, who was looking on, but who was not doing any betting.

"As we are not playing, suppose you join me in a drink."

Kit was about to decline, courteously, when he caught Frank's eye, and the latter nodded, almost imperceptibly, evidently having overheard the remark.

Kit instantly took the cue and replied, pleasantly:

"Certainly, if you'll excuse my not taking anything stronger than a lemonade."

"Anything you wish," replied the other, courteously.

"That's exactly what I'm going to take."

And laying his hand on Kit's shoulder in a friendly way, they threaded their way through the crowd to the counter.

It was momentarily deserted, and no one was standing there but a tall, rough-looking customer, who had evidently been drinking more than was good for him.

To add to his evil temper, he had been losing heavily in the poker game, and was evidently in a decidedly ugly mood.

Paying no more attention to him, the two young fellows gave their orders to one of the attendants, in response to his pleasant:

"What will it be, gentlemen?"

And while he was engaged in mixing the two lemonades, Kit's new acquaintance turned to him, and said:

"That you may understand how it happened that I invited you to drink, I must introduce myself."

"I am Frank's brother."

"I only reached here this evening, and while at supper he told me of what you had done this morning, and so described your appearance to me that I recognized you the moment you entered."

"Let me thank you, on my own behalf, for what you did for him."

"Your gratitude is grateful to me; but both you and he are making a mountain out of a very small mole-hill."

"That may be your view of it, but I assure you we look at it in a very different light."

"Well, here's to our life-long friendship," he added as the barkeeper placed their glasses before them, and placing the straw to his lips, he was about to drink, when he was interrupted by the man who stood near.

"Say! young fellows, what do yer drink such wash as thet, fur," hiccupped the bully, as he staggered toward them.

"Drink good old straight whisk', thet 'll make hair grow on yer faces."

"It evidently don't make a civil tongue grow in your head, at all events," quietly retorted Kit, as he began to suck on the cooling mixture.

"Nor does it seem to be of much benefit to you when you're playing poker," added his companion, who had been sitting in the game and who had been the chief winner.

"Not when I'm a-playin' with a lot o' card-sharps and black-legs," growled the man, staggering yet nearer Frank's brother.

"What do you mean?" returned the other, setting his glass on the counter, and looking his late adversary straight in the face.

"Thet I was cheated, an' swindled, an' thet you rung a cold deck in on me!"

"You're mistaken, my friend, and too drunk to know what you are talking about. Better go home—if you have one to go to."

Thrusting his hand deep into the pocket of his coat, the miner growled:

"F you say I'm drunk, yer lie, yer gamblin' thief!"

And raising his coat, he fired through the

pocket, straight at Kit's friend, who still leaned against the counter.

But he missed his aim, for Pete, the negro attendant, who was hovering about the trio, saw the action, and at the moment the miner moved his arm to raise his pistol, the darky lowered his head, and rushing from behind, butted the would-be assassin just below the short ribs with his woolly crown, sending him flying as if hurled from a catapult, knocking the wind from his entire body, and causing the bullet to bury itself harmlessly in the mahogany counter.

At the report the crowd scattered to the sides of the room, leaving a clear lane between the bar and the faro-table, and Frank and Dan, half rising, seemed ready to take part in any disturbance that might happen.

But as they saw the ludicrous termination of what might have been a fatal tragedy, they settled back in their seats, and the game went on as if nothing had happened.

Pete, shouldering the form of the inanimate miner, took it to the door, and incontinently dumped it in the street, where he relieved him of his weapons and left him to sleep off the effects of his debauch.

And the two young men, finishing their lemonades, walked into a back room and began to talk about a dozen different things, never once referring to the late occurrence, which seemed to them as if entirely unworthy of comment.

CHAPTER XIX.

A METAMORPHOSIS.

THEY had not sat long thus, when they were interrupted by a knock on the door, and in response to the answer, the black and smiling face of Pete was thrust inside.

He was grinning from ear to ear, and his white teeth shone like ivory behind his scarlet-red lips.

"Scuse me, gen'l'men, 'scuse me, Massa Charley, but Massa Frank, he wan' ter know ef you'll be good enuff ter spell him a bit."

"All right, Pete; but here!" as the negro was about to withdraw.

"Take this."

And pulling a bundle of bills from his pocket, he drew from it a hundred-dollar note, and handed it to the delighted darky.

"And this, Pete, added Kit, capping the gift with a bill of like denomination.

"Maybe you can do the same for me at some future time."

"Thank you gen'l'men; t'ank you bof."

"I always tries ter act with judicion, when any of the gen'l'men gits inter trouble."

And he smiled so vigorously that it really seemed to Kit as if the back of his head must inevitably fall off.

Excusing himself, Frank's brother left the room bidding Kit remain where he was as it was more than likely that Frank wanted to see and talk to him.

And in a moment the other came in and greeted Kit warmly.

"Delighted to see you, my boy, delighted."

"What's the best word?"

"There's nothing new; but I want you to do me a favor."

"Anything in the world, Kit."

"If you want any money, you can have every cent there is in the house."

"If you are in any other sort of trouble, we'll close the shebang and go with you wherever you wish."

"Thanks, old man, but it's nothing of that sort at all."

"When I saw you in Denver, you were riding a magnificent horse; have you him here?"

"Stabled and stalled not a hundred yards away from where we are sitting."

"He is fast?"

"I'll give fifty yards start in a quarter of a mile to any horse in Colorado, and bet a thousand to a hundred I'll beat him home."

"I thought as much when I saw him."

"I particularly need a speedy animal, and want to borrow him for a short time, say a week or two."

"Since I have owned Dandy, no leg but mine has ever been thrown across his back."

"I have never loaned him to a soul on earth and have vowed that I never will."

It was curious to see the look of disappointment that stole over Kit's face at this announcement, and he evidently could not comprehend how Frank could return such an answer after all his protestations.

But he was not allowed to remain long in suspense, for Frank, leaning back in his chair, broke out laughing and cried:

"There, there, Kit, don't look so glum."

"All the vows I have ever made about not loaning Dandy do not prevent my giving him away."

"He's yours, my boy, to do what you please with, but you must accept him as a gift."

"By the way, if I'm not mistaken, he is an exact match for your horse."

"So nearly alike that one not thoroughly familiar with them could not tell them apart."

"It is for this reason that I am so anxious to borrow him for a time—why, I am not at liberty to tell you."

"But I'll never accept him as a gift!"

"Oh, yes, you will!"

"Take him as freely as he is offered, and if I had a hundred horses you should have them all, willingly."

"As for your reasons for wanting him, keep them to yourself."

"At least let me buy him from you."

"Never!"

"Well, then, if you insist, I'll accept him, and cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for the gift."

"Bosh! What's a transaction of that sort between friends."

"When do you want him?"

"In an hour or two, when I return."

"All right; I'll tell Pete to saddle him, now."

"Never mind, I'll bring a saddle and bridle with me when I come back."

"Just as you wish."

"Off already? Well, drop in when you get back and say good-night to a fellow."

And shaking hands heartily the two friends separated, Frank returning to the faro table and Kit going to the hotel, procuring his horse and riding away toward his "den."

It was nearly eleven o'clock, the next morning, and the sun was shining high from the clear, blue vault above, when two young fellows rode side by side along the road which led toward the path which led to Colton's home.

Dressed exactly alike, their horses resembling each other perfectly, with twin saddles and bridles, the hair, eyes, features of the two riders perfect images, one of the other, any one meeting them would have removed his hat, scratched his head and been puzzled to know how their mothers could tell them apart.

They were chatting quietly, and one of them was saying:

"Upon my word, Dainty, if I thought that I was half as good looking a fellow as you make, I'd be the vainest man in the mountains!"

"You know we look exactly like each other."

"When we looked in the glass, this morning, you remarked how startling the likeness was."

"That is true, yet whenever I look at you, the more I am convinced that you are the better looking of the two."

"But now to business."

"When they see you, gallop straight down the hill—that horse is as sure footed as a goat—ride straight to Faro Frank's, the place is called 'The Broadway,' and stable your horse."

"Go inside and tell anybody you see that you want to go into the private room and lie down on the lounge, being tired."

"Wait for me there."

"I'll do exactly as you say; but here is my path, hide yourself carefully!"

"I will; good luck and good-by."

And Kit rode off into a thicket where he could not be seen from the road, and dismounting, seated himself on the grass to wait as patiently as he could.

Dainty rode rapidly up the path until she came near the end of her journey, when she proceeded slowly, until she could peer around the bank at the side and look ahead.

Seated under the tree which had so nearly been her gallows, she saw three men, eating their dinner, while their horses stood near, and riding out boldly, she showed herself openly.

She was instantly perceived, and supposed to be Kit, so with a shout, the men sprung to their horses, mounted and galloped toward her, while she coolly waited.

CHAPTER XX.

FACE TO FACE.

IT was evident that Colton and his men were completely deceived, and that they thought it was Kit who thus defied them, as they galloped down the valley toward Dainty.

It was doubtless the case, also, that they wished to capture her alive, for although their pistols glistened in the sunlight, not a weapon was drawn, not a shot fired.

As they began to draw uncomfortably near, Dainty turned Dandy's head, for she was mounted on Faro Frank's gift to Kit, and be-

gan to canter slowly down the path, increasing the speed of her horse as her pursuers drew nearer and nearer.

Kit had told her of Dandy's wonderful speed and endurance and she felt no anxiety about being able to ride away as she wished, whenever she desired, but as the men who were following her possessed good horses, she was by degrees compelled to quicken her pace, until finally, her horse fairly flew down the steep and rocky path, never stumbling once, and, picking his way over the loose stones that lay scattered about, never checked his speed a particle.

He proved magnificently what Kit had said of him:

"He is as sure-footed as a goat," while the light burden he carried seemed but a feather's weight on his broad back.

Reaching the road Dainty swept off to the right at full speed, again allowed the howling trio behind her to gain a few rods until a mile away from the path, and then, gently touching Dandy with her golden spur, she dashed off at a pace that defied pursuit.

Still Colton did not abandon the chase, but pressed on until he arrived at a spot where the road forked, one branch leading to the main stage-road, the other passing through The Gulch, and as the fleeing rider he was in pursuit of, was by this time out of sight, he drew rein and ordered his companions to stop.

He was completely nonplused, and knew not which direction to take.

"Curses on the young whelp!" he growled.

"Insulting us by riding nearly to our camp and then escaping in this manner!"

"The next time he comes within range, boys, I give you permission to shoot him down as you would a dog."

"Let's go back; I don't feel quite right yet, and suppose you are not entirely recovered from the shock."

And, in truth, such had been the effect of the lightning-stroke, that had killed one of their number and stunned the rest, that this was the first day since the event, that they had ventured outside of the house.

"We'll take a good rest to-night, and will be all right in the morning."

"There's no need of our keeping watch, no one will harm us, and that young cub will not dare venture near us, thinking as he doubtless does, that we are on the alert."

And so, turning their horses, they rode slowly back toward their camp, as they called it, meaning the stone house in which they lived, ostensibly carrying on the work of honest miners in the vicinity.

As they had swept by Kit's hiding-place, he looked with admiration upon the magnificent horsemanship displayed by Dainty, and the wonderful, easy, stretching stride of the animal she rode.

And as they disappeared in the distance, he mounted and galloped up the path they had just descended, and reaching the valley rode straight up to the house.

Having seen that there were three men in the party which pursued the girl, he was convinced that there was no one in the vicinity, believing, as he did, that one of their number had been killed by the lightning.

The black mark that had shown so plainly on his temple was almost proof sufficient of this, but had Kit needed any confirmation he would have found it in a green mound that rose above the turf, under the branches of the spreading tree.

Fresh earth scattered about showed that a grave had recently been dug there, and in it doubtless lay the body of the poor wretch who had been so suddenly stricken.

Leaving his horse standing there, Kit opened the door, which was unfastened, and entered the single room that composed the interior of the dwelling.

He had no specific purpose in coming there, but hoped that he might come across some clue that would lead to an explanation of the murder of Dainty's father, so he began rummaging around in every direction.

But look as he would, being hurried in his search by the thought that the bandits might return at any moment, he could find nothing, and was about to abandon the search, when he stumbled over a pair of high boots that stood in one corner.

This would not have attracted his attention had it not been for the fact that one of them gave out a metallic sound, which he at first thought proceeded from a spur; but to satisfy himself, he kicked it again, when the clink sounded louder than ever.

His curiosity thoroughly aroused, he picked up the boot, turned it upside down, when there fell to the floor with a clang, an oblong tin box, at the sight of which he started, and then eagerly picked it up.

The box was japanned, and on the top was written, evidently with some sharp-pointed instrument, the name of Drake Danford.

"Now here's luck!" soliloquized Kit.

"If I'm not entirely mistaken, this is the identical box that Dainty's father mentioned in his writing in the locket."

"I only hope the papers are still inside and have not yet been disturbed."

And he examined the box, which to his great joy, he found bound about with a piece of tape, which was sealed with wax, the seal bearing the stamp of a signet ring he had noticed on the dead man's finger.

The box could not have been opened without either cutting the tape or breaking the seal, so that Kit felt convinced that the contents had not been tampered with.

Hastily placing it in a capacious inner pocket of his coat, he left the house and again took his seat in the saddle, hoping that he might be able to regain his hiding-place by the road before Colton returned.

He felt convinced that they would abandon the chase when they reached the forks in the road, for he had impressed on Dainty the necessity of being so far ahead, when she arrived there, as to be out of sight, and thus baffle her pursuers.

Hurrying down the valley, he began the descent of the path, and was just congratulating himself upon being in time, when, as he rode out from behind the hill, he found himself almost face to face with Colton and his two companions!

CHAPTER XXI.

DAINTY'S PERIL.

DAINTY galloped swiftly along, nerving herself for the first experience that she was to have in her present costume, when brought face to face with those who knew Kit personally, and were familiar with his appearance.

Her voice was somewhat low-toned for a woman, though sweet and well-modulated, while Kit's voice was rather high-pitched, so that, should they converse in the hearing of a third party who could not see them, it would have been difficult for the listener to decide which one was speaking.

With his usual foresight Kit had given her the chips he had purchased the evening before at The Broadway, and which he had neglected to "cash in," thinking that some inquiry might be made for them.

He had related to her, even to the minutest particular, everything that had happened to him during his absence, so that she felt perfectly able to hold her own, should any reference be made to past events.

So she rode bravely up to the saloon after reaching the town, and was about to lead Dandy to the stable, having dismounted, when Pete, the woolly-headed, came bursting out of the door, removing his cap as he did so.

"Maw'nin', Massa Kit; you're back early."

"Didn't spect you so soon. I'll take your horse, sah," and consigning Dandy to the negro's care, Dainty strode into the saloon, much relieved that the first ordeal was safely passed.

But would she be as successful with sharp, shrewd Faro Frank, with keen-eyed Diamond Dan, with shrewd Charley?

That remained to be seen, and consoling herself with the thought that she was among Kit's friends, in any event, she walked straight up to the faro-table where Frank was busy with his checks, seeming much perplexed about something.

"Hello! Kit, my boy," cried Frank, extending his hand and grasping Dainty's delicate lavender glove.

"You're just the person I want to see."

"Did you carry off any of my chips last night when you left?"

"If you didn't, I'm hanged if I know where they have gone."

"I've got a few in my pockets," replied the girl, her voice trembling somewhat, despite her efforts to steady it.

"I'm awful sorry, Frank, but I clean forgot all about them."

"Well, I did, too, so we're even. It don't make a particle of difference, only I do like to keep track of them."

"How many have you got?"

"All I bought when I started in—five hundred or a thousand, I forget which."

Frank looked at Dainty a moment, as if he could not comprehend how a young fellow could forget a matter of five hundred dollars in a dozen hours, but said nothing, taking the checks that the girl threw on the table and stacking them up in regular piles.

"A thousand, even. Wait till I open the safe and I'll hand you the ducats."

"Oh, no hurry, keep 'em until some other time."

"But say, Frank, I'm dead tired: any objection to my going in yonder and taking a nap on the lounge?"

"Of course not; sleep there all day if you like, and if any body comes in here making a noise I'll fire 'em into the street."

"I'll go in with you and see that everything is all right."

Everything seemed in good order, so Faro Frank, telling the supposed Kit to lock the door if he wished, withdrew, while Dainty, trembling like a leaf, shot the bolt, and threw herself on the lounge, crying bitterly.

"Oh, my father," she sobbed in a whisper, "I fear that my woman's strength will not be equal to the work I have vowed to perform."

"Would you, I wonder, be very angry if I broke that vow?"

But she soon became calmer, and, overcome by nervous exhaustion, was soon in a deep sleep, which promised to do her more good than all the drugs physician ever prescribed.

She slept on for some time unconscious of her surroundings, when she was suddenly awakened by high words in the saloon, for the partitions were none of the thickest, and only a thin plank wall separated the room in which she was from the bar-room.

Wide awake on the instant and with every sense alert, she sat up and listened intently.

"Mr. Francis gave strict orders when he went out that no one was to be allowed to go into that room," said a voice which Dainty supposed to be that of the barkeeper, who was alone in the saloon, Faro Frank having gone to his lodgings and taken Pete with him.

The rest of the barkeepers had not yet put in an appearance, as very little business was done at The Broadway, or, indeed, at any of the saloons, before the lamps were lighted.

"I don't give a cent wot Faro Frank er enny other bloke says, I'm a-goin' inter that room an' find thet young snip wot broke my wrist and lick the stuffin' outen him."

"Yes, you bet, an' I'm a-goin' too!" growled a second voice.

Dainty immediately realized that these could be none others than Cockey and Blinkey, who had evidently heard of her being there and supposed that it was Kit.

These two worthies evidently were familiar with The Broadway, and knew that as Kit was not visible in the main room he must be concealed in the small room, which was reserved for private poker-parties, when the different gamblers of The Gulch got to bucking against each other.

The two men evidently began to walk toward the room where Dainty sat, and she, drawing a revolver, was about to prepare herself to resist to the last extremity, when the voice of the barkeeper was again heard:

"I tell you, once for all, you can't go in there; and if you persist—"

There was a sickening thud, and something came crashing against the partition and then fell to the floor.

"Well struck, Blinkey," remarked the cruel voice of Cockey.

"Thet fool'll not bother us any more; now, let's go an' skin the youngster."

In a moment there came a thundering rap on the door, and in response Dainty called out boldly:

"What do you want?"

"Open this door or we'll bu'st her down!"

Trembling with fear Dainty turned to the open window, and was about to climb out when it was darkened, and an agile form sprang into the room.

"Here I am, Dainty," he whispered, "safe and— But what is that?" he asked, as the door cracked and creaked.

"Cockey and Blinkey are trying to get in to kill me, thinking it is you."

"Oh-ho! Is that the way the land lies? Stand to one side, out of harm's way, and see what we do with murderers where I come from!"

The door crashed down as Kit drew his revolvers, while as Blinkey and Cockey came stumbling in, two pistols spoke as one, and the men who were ravening for his blood fell to the floor without a groan or a cry.

Each had been shot through the heart!

CHAPTER XXII.
AT THE NICK OF TIME.

WE must now go back in our story to the moment when Kit encountered Colton, Hercules and Big Jim, as the third of this delectable trio was called.

It is almost needless to say that Kit was much vexed at this unfortunate meeting, for he knew that Dainty would be nervous under the ordeal through which she was about to pass; and now that his ruse had been successful, and he had obtained more than he had hoped for or expected at the stone house, he wished to consult with her regarding their future movements.

But there he was, face to face with the gang, and putting on the best face he could, he saluted them blandly:

"Good-morning, Mr. Colton; good-morning, Mr. Hercules; good morning, Mr. What's-your-name, I never have had the pleasure of an introduction, so cannot address you as I would wish."

The trio gazed at Kit as if they thought him some supernatural visitor, not being able to conceive how he came to be there when they were certain that they had lately pursued him for a distance of miles, and being positive that there was no other means of reaching the point where they had encountered him save the road by which they had returned.

Hercules was by far the most troubled of the three, and trembled visibly, whispering to Colton:

"Where in thunder could he hev sprung from?"

"Tain't nateral, an' I swear I believe he's a ghost!"

"He couldn't 'a' got back hyar onless his critter kin fly, an' I don't see no wings."

"We'll soon see whether his be mortal or immortal!" cried Colton, and leveling his revolver he fired straight at Kit, who sat quietly smiling at him.

Either his aim was exceptionally bad or his nerves were decidedly unstrung for the bullet whizzed harmlessly by Kit's head and he laughed sardonically, adding to the terror of the giant and Big Jim.

Hercules did not remain any longer to see what would be the result of a second shot, but put spurs to his horse, and with a yell of fear started off up the road on a dead run, being followed by Colton, whose horse becoming unmanageable, followed the flying hoofs of his stable mate.

Recovering somewhat from his fright and being really a brave man, although a natural bully and thief, Big Jim drew one of his revolvers and was about to cock and fire it at Kit.

But he never finished the movement.

More rapid than thought was Kit's motion, and as his pistol was raised to a level with his eye, he fired apparently without taking aim.

And true to its mark the leaden messenger sped, and entering Big Jim's forehead, passed through his brain and sent him with a crash to the ground, stone dead.

Kit had well preserved his reputation for being the "quickest man on the trigger in the State of Colorado!"

And then he cantered on, realizing that two of the band upon which rested the suspicion of Dainty's father's death, had been wiped out of existence.

One had fallen by the hand of Providence, the second by his own hand.

But the two most desperate of the quartette yet remained alive, one of whom had possibly fired the fatal shot which killed Mr. Danford, and made Dainty an orphan.

Reaching the forks of the road, Kit saw by the hoof-prints in the mud, that the two horse-men had taken the left-hand road, or the one which led to the stage route, so riding on a little further, he fastened his horse, and, retracing his steps, hid himself and waited at the point where the roads branched.

He sat for some time, waiting until at length he heard the sound of voices and soon perceived Colton and Hercules riding slowly back, the latter casting fearful glances ahead and seeming to need considerable urging to persuade him to continue the route.

Colton was arguing with him and urging the necessity of returning to their home to secure sundry documents, which were there, and which would be of immense value to them.

At which remark Kit chuckled quietly and tapped the tin box in his pocket gently.

As the two men disappeared down the road, Kit, having located them, which was all he cared to do for the present, returned to where his

horse was standing, mounted and rode away to The Gulch.

As we have seen he arrived just in time, and had he been delayed a minute longer, would have been too late.

Cockey and Blinkey having been so summarily disposed of, Kit turned his attention to Dainty, whom he found quivering like an aspen leaf, but he soon soothed and quieted her, after which he, in as few words as possible, related his adventures, telling her also of his success in finding the tin box.

"And now," said he, "slip out of the window and return home, and there wait for me."

"I must see Frank and tell him what happened while he was absent."

"Do not take the main street, but ride out back of town, so as to escape observation, if it be possible!"

"Oh, Kit!" sobbed the frail young girl, "do not remain long away from me!"

"I am not so strong as I thought and a few more days of this will kill me."

"I will be there almost as soon as you are, my child, and whether near or far, will always watch over you."

With a long hand-clasp they separated, Dainty stepping out of the window and Kit going into the bar-room.

There he found the barkeeper, lying on the floor, stone dead, his skull having been crushed like an egg-shell by a tremendous blow from the butt of a pistol.

The sight was a sickening one, and Kit gladly turned away from it and walked to the door, where he encountered Frank, who entered at that moment.

In a few words Francis was placed in full possession of the facts, and thanked Kit for so quickly avenging the death of his assistant, to whose side he walked and looked down at him sadly.

"Poor Jack," he said, "he was a nice fellow and as honest as he was clever."

"But as he is gone, we will see that he has a funeral that will do him justice."

"As for that carrion back there," and he nodded in the direction where Cockey and Blinkey lay, "I'll have Pete dump it in a wheel-barrow and take it over to the Gold Dust, with my compliments."

And Kit, promising to see him soon, went to the stable and rode off toward Dainty's underground home, as fast as his horse would carry him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FEARFUL DEATH.

As Kit rode past the still smoking and smoldering ruins of Dainty's former residence, which yet burned slightly at the bottom of the mass of timber which had fallen into the cellar, he became aware of the fact that he was followed by some one, as he could hear hoof-beats sounding on the road behind him.

Anxious as he was to once more rejoin Dainty, who might, he feared, be still suffering from the late shock to her nerves, he hurried on, turned to the left, and after a short gallop, arrived at the hollow tree, and sending his horse trotting off up the bank, he swung around by the vine, and rapped on the trunk.

The door was fastened on the inside, and he was compelled to rap louder and louder, finally hammering with the butt of his revolver, before he heard the sliding of the bolt, and the door being opened, he saw Dainty standing before him.

"Excuse my keeping you waiting, but I had gone down the underground passage for a moment, to see if there was any danger of any one entering through the cellar. But the passage is full of smoke, and the other end is choked up with rubbish from the fire, so that it is impossible that any one should notice the opening."

Kit stepped in and closed the door after him, when, drawing the tin box from his pocket, he handed it to Dainty, saying:

"No hands but yours shall break this seal or untie this knot."

"Then come below," she answered, "and together we will examine its contents."

Seated in the dining-room, Dainty struggled with the intricately twisted tape for a few moments, and then seizing a knife, quickly solved the problem by cutting the knot, placed the box on the table and opened it.

Lying one on top of the other were two sheets of folded foolscap, which she unfolded and read, afterward handing them to Kit.

The first, evidently written some years before, as was proven by the faded color of the ink and the yellowness of the paper, bore date 1866, and was thus worded:

"I give and bequeath everything I now possess or may hereafter come in possession of, to my beloved daughter Dainty."

"(Signed) HENRY DANFORD,

"Witness, JAMES HARTWELL.

"New York, December 11, 1866."

The other was dated 1884, and was in the form of a letter to Dainty, and, condensed, informed her that by great good fortune, he was able to leave to her property which would make her an immensely rich woman.

He had discovered a mine, which, properly worked, would prove of inestimable value, it being situated in a canyon which was supposed to be inaccessible, and which—

Here the letter terminated abruptly with the words:

"I am interrupted, but will finish this later."

The date of the month at the top was that on which Mr. Danford had been murdered.

He had evidently been writing when interrupted by the assassins' knock, and never had been able to finish it.

"Had your father never spoken to you of this matter?" asked Kit.

"Never. He was a peculiar man, and always put on paper any matter of interest he wished to convey to a person."

"He often told me that, if he should suddenly die, I must search the house for his will, but never referred in any manner to any of his property or wealth."

"In fact I always thought we were very poor, for our larder was empty half the time."

"But how did Colton become familiar with the existence of these papers?"

"I can not imagine."

"Well, we must endeavor to solve the mystery, and I will devote myself to that end."

"But I must go out and see if those who were following me are in the neighborhood."

And leaving the room, Kit returned to the hollow tree and climbed up the ladder to the lookout hole.

With a rashness that was unpardonable, he immediately stuck his head out, and looked around when suddenly a shout echoed from below, so startling him that he nearly lost his balance and came within an ace of falling from his lofty perch to the ground below.

Just below, one on the right, the other on the left of the tree, stood, looking up at him, Colton and Hercules, and as he jerked his head inside, a bullet whizzed past the hole, clipping the leaves of the vine which clambered round it, and burying itself in the tree-trunk.

"We've treed him, Cap!" cried Hercules, exultingly, "an' now we'll purreed ter smoke him out in the most scierntific manner."

"What are you going to do, you fool?" returned Colton, as he began to move about, collecting dead branches and twigs, and piling them about the trunk of the tree.

"Goin' ter light a bonfire fer his benefit."

"And you expect to smoke him out in that manner?"

"Sure."

"Why, you double-dyed idiot, can't you see that the whole tree is so wrapped about with that green vine that it would never take fire?"

"Right you are, Cap."

"That sarcumstance didn't strike me afore."

And scratching his bushy head he continued:

"But what'll we do about it?"

"Camp here and starve him out, standing watch and watch."

"He'll have to come out at last, and as there is evidently no way of getting out of the tree except by that hole, which only looks small on account of its immense distance from the ground, he will have to climb down the vine to reach the earth."

"That is evidently the way he got in the tree and that is the way he'll have to get out."

"When he climbs down we can easily capture him, for he will be able to offer no resistance."

"An' then we'll chuck him inter the canyon. 'Wot a be-a-utiful smash ther'll be when he gits to ther bottom!"

And Hercules grinned in high glee as he gloated over the anticipated death of the young fellow.

Colton had succeeded in talking him out of his superstitious fear, inventing some plausible excuse to account for Kit's mysterious disappearance.

It had been by accident that they had seen Kit and tracked him to his hiding-place, believing it to be only a temporary resort, and not dreaming of the perfect living arrangements that existed in the ground below their feet, or of the lower entrance to the hollow tree.

The day passed, and the night, and the two

men watched by turns, having luncheon with them and procuring water from the stream near by: and still Kit gave no sign of life, and when the third day had passed Hercules grew impatient.

"I'm a-goin' ter climb up ther tree by ther vine, an' take a squint inside, Cap," he said, toward evening.

"Go ahead."

And Hercules grasped the stout vine, which twisted and turned in every direction, and easily climbed to the hole, into which he thrust his head.

But just then something terrible happened, for the vine, growing weaker as it grew higher from the ground, was here not strong enough to bear his immense weight, and first broke away under his feet, leaving him hanging by the hands.

And then the supports he grasped also tore away, and he was left hanging by his neck to the jagged bark at the lower edge of the hole, which tore and cut his throat like the fangs of a wolf.

And finally, the rotten wood of the trunk splintered and gave way and his huge body went turning and tumbling and twisting through the void, until it crashed on the cruel, pointed rocks below, where it was crushed out of all semblance of humanity.

Colton, covering his eyes with his hands to shut out the awful sight, uttered a fearful yell, and fled wildly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Kit, who was standing at the bottom of the tree-trunk, when Hercules had looked in, although invisible from above on account of the darkness, had been a partial witness of Hercules's struggles, and immediately realized what had happened when he heard Colton's cry.

So climbing up the ladder, he looked cautiously down, and saw, lying far below him, all that remained of Hercules, and then placing the mirror in position, surveyed the plain behind him.

Almost immediately his eye caught the reflection of a human figure lying motionless, a short distance away, which, from its general appearance, he instantly recognized as that of Colton.

Hurrying down the ladder, he opened the door and soon reached Colton, who was groveling on the ground in an agony of fear and remorse, and immediately secured him, tying his hands and feet firmly, and then searching him in hopes of finding some further clue to the lost mine.

There was nothing in his pockets but a half-finished letter, which Kit, having called Dainty, read to the girl:

"MY DEAR CURT," it began.

"I got your letter all O. K., and through it learned of Danford's communication to you, in which he tells you of the mine he had discovered. Thinking that your proposition that we should obtain possession of it was a good one, I watched his house, and spied his every movement, night after night, through a convenient crevice, until finally my patience was rewarded, one evening, by seeing him come from an inner room, where he doubtless had some secret hiding-place, carrying a tin box.

"He began to write a letter, but I, believing that the box held the memoranda we wanted, and fearing the return of the girl—Dainty, you know—knocked, and asked for admission.

"It was raining like thunder, and the old man, hastily putting the letter into the box, where there was I saw, another document, tied the receptacle with a tap and, having sealed it, put it in a small cupboard, and then, after a few words opened the door.

"And then I shot him and secured the box—what do you think of your humble servant, Craig Colton, any way?

"It was pretty tough to kill a man whose former friend I was and whose hospitality I had so often enjoyed, but it was the only way.

"He was a perfect lion in strength, you know, and if I had not adopted strong measures, we would never have succeeded in getting what we wanted so much.

"I am afraid the girl may give us trouble, particularly as a young champion has lately espoused her cause, coming from nobody knows where, and I shall remain until I have settled them both.

"I have had no time yet to examine the papers, but will do so soon, when I will finish this."

Here the letter, containing full proof of Colton's guilt, ended, and Kit, turning to Dainty, said sternly:

"There lies your father's murderer, whom you have vowed to track to his grave.

"What shall be his fate?"

Stern as destiny itself, Dainty, with not the slightest tremor in her voice, answered:

"Death!"

"And by what means?"

"Send him to join his comrade!"

And with a gesture like a queen, Dainty pointed toward the canyon.

Kit, going to his and Colton's horses, took from their heads the raw-hide ropes with which they were fastened, and then, saddling Colton's horse, he returned to the spot where the ex-captain lay.

Untying his feet, and lifting him into the saddle, he fastened him firmly in the seat, tying him to the horn with one lariat and to the rings in the cantle with the other.

Then, taking a large silk handkerchief from his pocket, he blindfolded the horse so carefully that not a ray of light could enter his eyes, the poor brute quivering all over, as if he anticipated his terrible end.

Then, leading the horse by the bridle, he walked close to the edge of the precipice, stopped, and turning, with whip in hand, he waited until Dainty should give the signal to him to lash the horse on the flanks and cause him to bound madly forward over into the fearful gulf below.

But the girl was standing, with closed eyes and clasped hands, her face turned toward heaven, praying, and was unaware of what Kit had been doing.

But a moment later she looked toward him and realizing what an awful fate he had in store for Colton, she leaped forward with all the desperate energy of her nature, seized the horse by the bridle and dragged him away from the brink, crying:

"Oh, Kit! I can not, can not do it!"

"See! I break my vow and let this man go free, my father's murderer though he is."

And tearing the bandage from the horse's head, she cut the ropes that bound Colton and with a sweep of her hand pointed to the east.

And without a word he turned, without a word rode away and, without looking back, disappeared in the distance.

"Thank you, Dainty; it is only what I expected from you," said Kit.

"And now your task is done, your father's murder avenged, for the pardon you extended to him is more bitter than death.

"But now, before we separate, let me ask you a question.

"Short as our acquaintance has been, it has been so fraught with danger as to bind us more closely than years of friendship.

"Can you reciprocate the love I have borne for you since the instant I saw you?"

"Can you, honestly and with no thought of gratitude paying a supposed debt, lay your hand in mine and say: 'Kit, I love you, and will be your wife?'"

"I can and do, Kit, for, as this is no time for false pretenses, I can say to you, frankly, that no man but you could ever be my husband."

Two weeks after that day, Kit and Dainty were married in Denver, and that evening Faro Frank, Diamond Dan and Charley Francis, Frank's brother, kept open house, and champagne flowed like water.

The whole town was invited to drink as much as they wanted and Old Pete, in particular, became so very hilarious that he passed most of the latter part of the evening in going from door to door, and butting them into splinters with his woolly head.

Kit and Dainty went East, and were not seen in The Gulch again for some weeks.

THE END.

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